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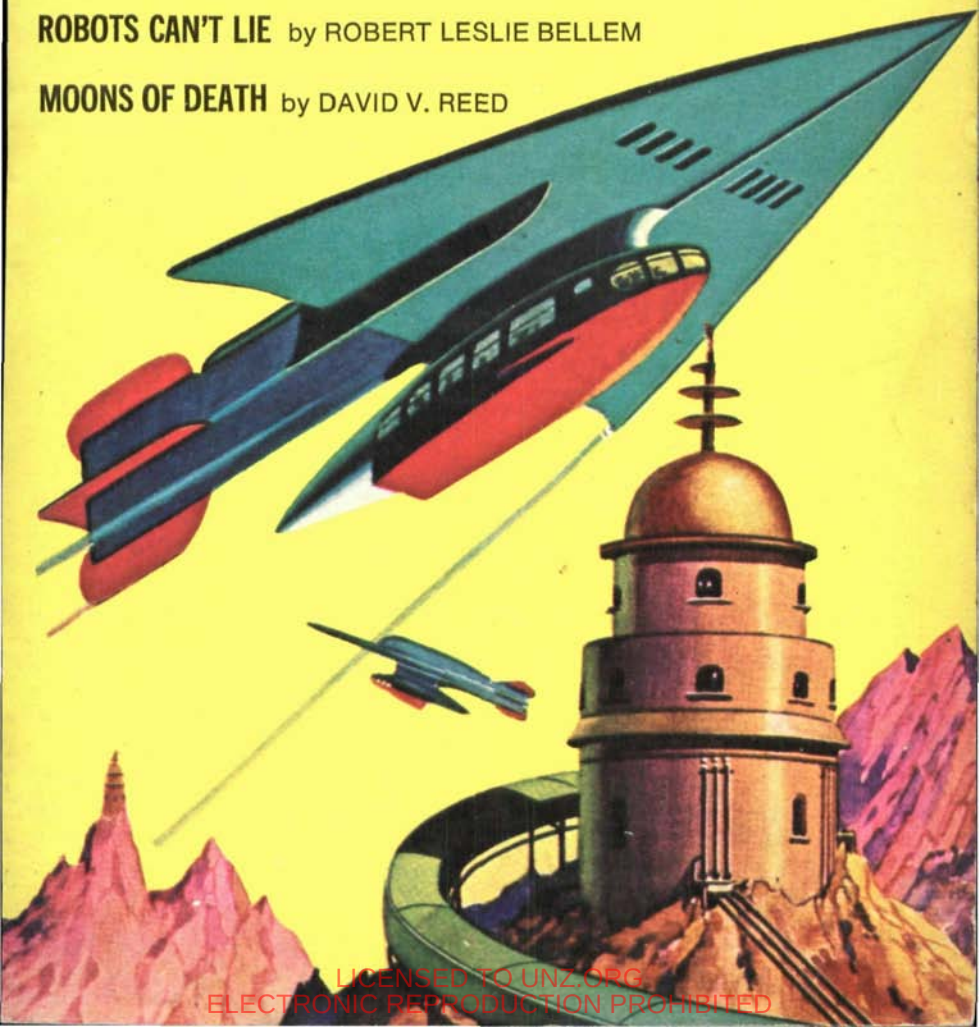

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Cover by James B. Settles, depicting "Flying Wing Of Pluto"

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURE CLASSICS is published bi-monthly by Ultimate Publishing Co., Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing N.Y. 11364 at 60¢ a copy. Subscription rates: One year (6 issues) U.S. and possession: $3.00; Canada and Pan American Union Countries: $3.50; all other countries: $4.00

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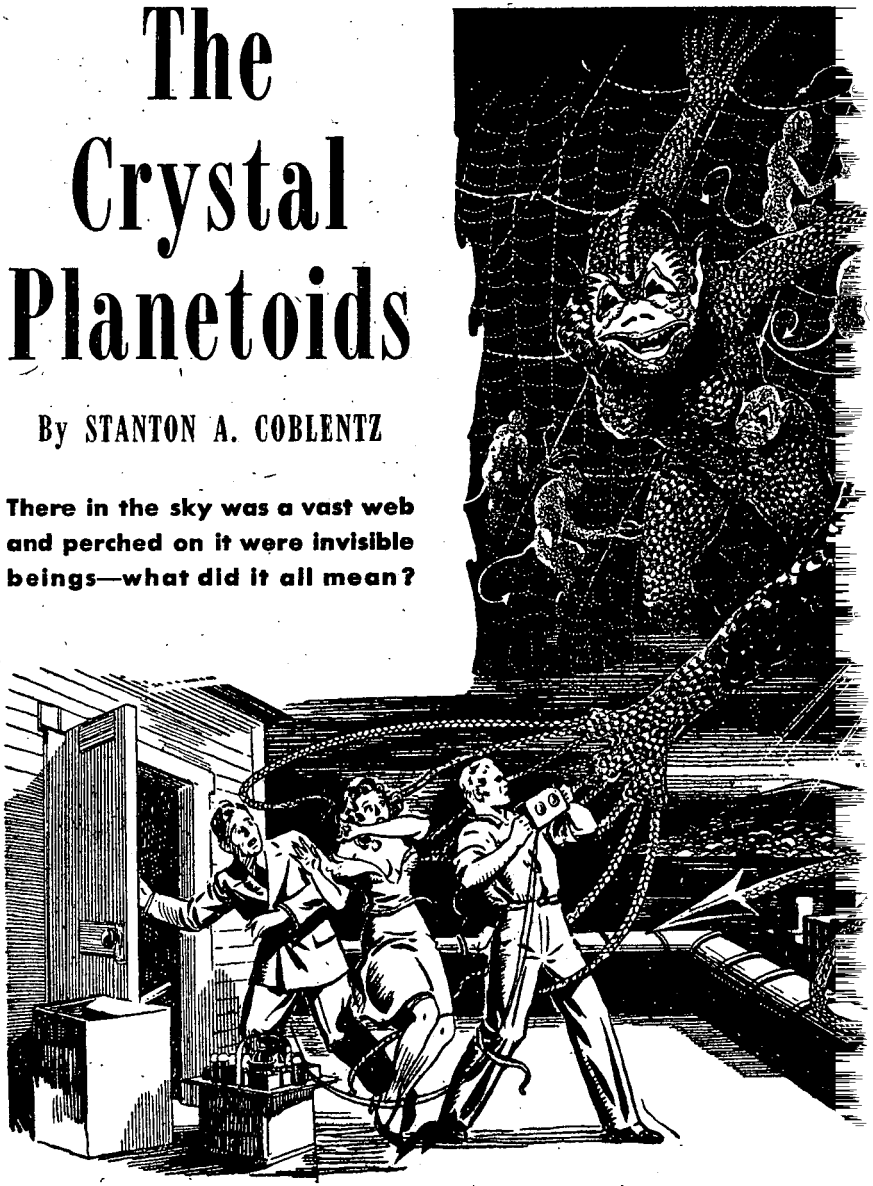
The Crystal Planetoids

By STANTON A. COBLENTZ

There in the sky was a vast web and perched on it were invisible beings—what did it all mean?



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PHILIP DUNBAR ran a lean exploratory hand through his touseled long black hair. There was a sardonic, faintly quizzical look in his dark, trimly moustached face, which acquaintances were inclined to describe as "handsome, but saturnine." His little jet-points of eyes, as he stared across at the next laboratory table, glittered enigmatically.

"Well, Ronny," he inquired, in a drawl that rasped, "found it at last?"

Ronald Gates peered up from amid a mass of lenses, batteries and wires. His frank, open face widened into a broad smile. His clear blue eyes sparkled.

"Yes, by heaven," he confessed, enthusiastically, "I think I've got that devil licked!"

Instantly Dunbar was at his side.

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"Like hell you have!" he doubted.

At the same time, from the opposite end of the great laboratory, a feminine voice broke out,

"Oh, good, Ronald, I knew you'd do it!" And the tall form of Eleanor Firth, its youthful attractiveness scarcely dimmed by the stained rubber gloves and apron she was wearing, came gliding toward the men. Her big golden-brown eyes blazed with admiration as she turned them full upon Gates. "I knew it, Ronald—I knew you simply had to!"

To an onlooker, the relationship of the men and the girl would have been crystal-clear. Dunbar's manner, as he glared at Gates, was dagger-sharp; Gates had no eyes for Dunbar at all; while both men regarded the young lady with softening glances that were eloquent.

Why was it, Dunbar reflected, that they had all taken to staying in overtime here at their place of employment, the laboratory of the Merlin Research Institute? True, Gates was all worked up about that damnable invention of his! And Eleanor—wasn't it just like a woman to find an excuse to stay when she knew Gates would be there? As for himself—if he didn't want to be shoved out of the picture, he had no choice but to work on after hours!

"Yes, by glory! I think I've done the trick!" Gates was exclaiming. "If you folk'll just come with me to the roof, I'll demonstrate!"

He took up a black instrument resembling a pair of opera glasses, except that it was equipped with large red lenses, and was attached by wires to a cluster of minute batteries and radio-like tubes.

"What did you say you call the contraption?" asked Dunbar, as Gates started upstairs with his invention.

"The Infra-Red Eye."

"Why in blazes do you call it that?"

"Just wait a minute, and you'll see. You know as well as I do, Dunbar, photographs taken in infra-red light will reveal clear details through a mist. Why must the human eye be blind where the camera can see? It is all a question of securing the proper adaptation to etheric vibrations—which I have done by means of invisible rays produced by electrical action on certain iridium and osmium salts in these tubes."

DUNBAR grunted a half coherent reply, and threw open the roof-door. As they came out into the heavy mist-laden air of the late July afternoon, the humidity rolled from them visibly. There was a peculiar stagnation in the atmosphere, as though the very breath of heaven had been congealed. Featureless gray clouds hung wearily over the landscape; a dull, blank haze obscured everything beyond a few hundred yards. One might have said that the very elements had gone to sleep.

"Goodness, I do wish we could get some relief from this atrocious heat!" sighed Eleanor.

"The twenty-ninth continuous day of it, unless I've missed my count!" grumbled Dunbar, as he mopped his perspiring brow. "Doesn't it beat the devil? What's more, it's getting worse!"

"Yes, and the strangest thing of all is, it seems to affect the whole world!" returned the girl. "I just can't believe it's not something more than common weather!"

"Hate to tell you what I suspect it is!" returned Dunbar, ominously.

"Come, come, folks, what are you so cheerful about, all of a sudden?" Gates demanded, as he examined the adjustments of the wires. "Good heavens! I'm sick and tired of hearing there's something supernatural about a heat

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spell, just because it happens to be unusually prolonged."

"Yes, but the other phenomena!" broke in Dunbar, his sharp eyes glinting with hostility. "The dust clouds—the checking of normal wind movements—the indefinable thickening in the atmosphere—the thunder storms of unprecedented violence—"

"Nothing has been definitely established," denied Gates. "Personally, I doubt if it's anything at all, aside from a cycle of exceptional sun-spot activity. But we're wasting our time. Ready now for the infra-red eye?"

"I'm all keyed up!" announced Eleanor, casting the young man one of her strangely kindled, animated glances.

"Here, you make the first test," he decided, thrusting the black instrument into her hands. "Just fit it to your eyes like binoculars. Turn that screw for the adjustment. Wait! I'll see to the current!"

He switched a lever, drew back a panel, and pressed a button. But, aside from a faint whirring sound, there was no apparent effect.

"Now focus the instrument!" he went on. "Point it anywhere. If you don't see through that haze as easily as a knife cuts butter, then set me down as a fraud and a liar!"

The girl screwed up her eyes. Faint wrinkles were visible on her broad, creamy white brow. A second passed in silence. Then an astonishing change overcame her coutenance.

All at once, her lips drew apart in an incredulous expression. A gasp came from between her lips. A pallor spread across her cheeks. For several seconds she remained as if glued to the instrument.

GRIMACING wrily, she snapped herself away from the eye-piece with a horrified

"Ugh!" Her eyes bulged. Her whole form was trembling.

"I—I—I guess I'm seeing things!" she explained, lamely.

Then, observing how strangely Dunbar was staring at her, she thrust the instrument at him.

"Here, you—you just look for yourself!"

Dunbar took up the apparatus, and peered through it steadily for perhaps half a minute. But he too, when he put it down, was visibly paler.

"God! Am I crazy?" he grunted. "Here, Ronny, better have a peep yourself—"

But Gates had already snatched up the instrument. And he too gasped as he adjusted the lenses. For he saw nothing that he had anticipated.

The only purpose of the Infra-Red Eye, as he himself had declared, had been to penetrate a haze. But how startlingly the results had exceeded expectations!

Spread far above the earth's surface, in the form of colossal cobwebs, were long tenuous strands, woven in a web many layers deep. The threads, colorless and almost transparent, were thin as though composed of some silken fabric; but were enormously long, and stretched in great curves from horizon to zenith. Over the entire firmament they seemed to be bent and twisted by the tens of thousands, forming intricate geometric patterns, and uncannily giving the impression of enclosing the earth in a great cage. Wavering slightly in the faint breezes of the upper spaces, they covered every section of the visible heavens, even spreading their dim crisscrossing bars across the moon.

As if this discovery in itself was not ghastly enough, a still more terrible sight presented itself. Scores of beings, vaguely human-shaped and each with

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many limbs dangling octopus-like, swung agilely along the gigantic webs. Of prodigious size—seemingly not less than fifteen or twenty feet tall—the creatures were of a watery pallor that made only the bare outlines of their forms visible. Each, in the middle of an egg-shaped head, displayed two oddly three-cornered eyes that glowed with dull red flames; each possessed six or eight many-fingered hands with which it was adding new segments to the monstrous web.

With a groan, Gates put down the instrument; and, wiping his streaming brow, sagged against a wall for support. But the horror in his eyes matched that in the faces of his companions as the three stared at one another in open-mouthed amazement.

CHAPTER II

The Terror Strikes

IT WAS as Dunbar had remarked. For nearly a month, unexampled meteorological disturbances had been occurring throughout the earth. Not only in the northern hemisphere had a record heat blanketed every land; in regions far below the Equator, the accustomed mid-winter chill had disappeared; indeed, an almost tropical calm had been reported as far south as Cape Horn. Everywhere on the earth's surface, normal wind currents had been retarded or halted; everywhere dust and mist had accumulated; everywhere —even in the usually thunderless coastal regions of California—electrical storms of unparalleled violence had been of almost daily occurrence. But scientists, having no plausible explanation, had for the most part looked on in mute bewilderment.

There were, however, some who professed to believe that the shattered remnants of a comet had entered the earth's atmosphere; and supported their theory by pointing out that quantities of some gaseous foreign substance, which as yet they had been unable to analyze, had been detected in the stratosphere; while scores of high-flying airplanes had recently been slowed down or wrecked by unexplained impediments.

Few persons as yet saw any connection between the extraordinary weather and the reports of astronomers that dozens of minute bodies had been detected through telescopes, revolving as satellites about the earth just beyond its atmospheric limits. For lack of a better theory, it was assumed that they were asteroids or "minor planets" which had ventured too close to the earth and had been caught by its gravitational power; although no one could say why so many of them should have been discovered almost simultaneously. Besides, it was hard to account for the peculiar glassy appearance of these so-called Crystal Planetoids—an appearance which did not at all indicate the nickel or iron composition that might have been expected.

NOT all these facts were in the minds of the three observers on the roof as they made their disconcerting discovery. But there were certain things which they did realize clearly enough.

"By glory," exclaimed Gates, his big eyes as wide with surprise as though he had seen the dead. "By glory! I just can't believe those great spidery devils are real—"

"Real or not, I—I've got a feeling we shouldn't stay here," Eleanor muttered, her face still white, as she started toward the door. "I—I—something tells me it isn't safe!"

"What in tarnation do you think can happen to us here more than down be-

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low?" demanded Gates. And then, with a shrug, "I'm going to take another peep through that glass!"

"Sure, go ahead! Might as well all wait, and die together!" Dunbar growled. "D'ye know, I've got an idea Eleanor's right. If we've a spark of sense left in our hides—"

Gates cast him a scornful glance, noting what an abject figure he seemed to be, as, with terror convulsing his lean, moustached face, he went slouching away.

"Hope I'll fall dead before I get so soft!" reflected the inventor.

Yet, despite himself, his pulses were throbbing as he returned to the Infra-Red Ray and observed the ominous, ruddy glow that, within the last minute, had come across the heavens. Was not the atmosphere thicker, hotter, heavier than ever? Why did it seem to bear down on him like a stony weight? Why within him that impulse which he sternly repressed—that impulse to race for shelter?

For a few seconds, after he had readjusted the instrument, he saw only what he had observed before: the prodigious spidery webs, with the huge octopus-limbed creatures swinging across them.

But almost immediately he made another observation. And, as he did so, a cry came to his lips. It was a cry of horror, issuing from some vast instinctive depth—a cry such as one might utter if one saw a man-eating tiger springing toward one with wide-open jaws. "For God's sake! Quick! Run—for your lives!"

Even as he uttered this plea, Gates dropped the instrument and started away. Dunbar was already in the doorway, into which he was disappearing with the violence of panic; while just behind him Eleanor was scampering like a frightened wild thing.

But they were just a second too late. There came a rushing as of a great wind. There came a moment as of immense shadows, sweeping down with lightning velocity. There came a glimpse of tenuous shapes in rapid motion, a little like the spokes of a furiously turning wheel. At the same time, in a nightmarish, unbelievable fashion, Gates saw Dunbar and Eleanor arrested in mid-flight. Something vague and gray, which looked like a gigantic claw, seemed to be woven about them both. But it all happened too quickly for him to be sure. In the same instant, he beheld them both jerked into air; then whirled skyward at rocket speed, while their cries rang in his ears.

At the same instant also, as he stared at his companions, stunned and gasping, he felt something soft but powerful seizing him about the middle—something wriggling, and snake-like, and icy chill of touch. He was never to know whether he screamed in the extremity of his terror; all that he was aware was that there came a mighty jerk, and that, helpless as a hare in an eagle's talons, he rose into air with a speed that almost beat out his breath; and saw the roofs of the city fading beneath him amid the reddish haze.

FOR several minutes, beneath the clubbing rapidity of the flight, the captive's senses deserted him. And when, feeling dazed and drugged, he revived, it was to find himself amid a universe of fog in which the earth had receded from sight. He had, however, the distinct sensation of still rising—rising at tremendous speed. And he noticed—and this, to his mind, was the most incredible thing of all—that he was surrounded by an egg-shaped jelly-like transparent envelope about fifteen feet long. Not until much later did he realize that this envelope enclosed oxy-

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gen enough for him to breathe, and maintained it at a temperature and pressure without which life at his great elevation would have been impossible.

He had no way of knowing how much time went by in that night-marish flight. He did, however, feel sure that many minutes had passed before at length he found himself above the mists. Blanketed in vapor, the earth rolled beneath him, shadowy and featureless; while, in a crepuscular dimness, he saw the stars glittering from the purple-gray void. But what particularly held his attention was the sight of several monstrous creatures—long and spidery, and with dangling octopus limbs—which drifted ghost-like through the vagueness just outside the egg-shaped envelope, with malevolently glowing three-cornered reddish eyes.

As he still rose, past what might have been the upper limits of the stratosphere, he saw a silvery globe sparkling above him in the moonlight. At first he thought it to be a mere speck; but its disk rapidly widened, until it appeared as large as the sun, then as great as several suns, then seemed to fill the entire heavens with its pale glassy form, which shed a tintless cold light that made Gates shudder.

Actually, the sphere was not more than a few hundred yards across; but to the bewildered victim it seemed enormous as some prodigy of nature. His confusion was only increased by the fact that he saw the stars moving rapidly past it, with a westward drift, showing that it was swinging swiftly to the east on an orbit of its on. So dazed was the captive that it took him minutes to identify it as one of the Crystal Planetoids.

By this time, they had reached the surface of the sphere, which he could see to be composed of a jelly-like substance with the appearance of milky glass. As they drew near, their speed rapidly diminished, until they came to a halt almost in contact with the great globe. Then, as if at its own volition, part of the surface billowed back, like a paper flap blown by the wind; and Gates, with the sensation of one entering a prison in a strange land, found himself drifting inside the sphere.

As suddenly as if it had evaporated, the egg-shaped envelope had disappeared, and he caught a whiff of hot, heavy, foul-smelling air, reminding him of a breeze straight from a menagerie. He coughed and gasped, and, as he did so, became aware of an unimaginably horrifying scene.

HE STOOD inside the sphere at its lowest part, and gazed up into a circular space that, to his startled senses, seemed of stupendous magnitude. Woven about this vastness at all heights and angles was an intricacy of webs; webs built in concentric circles; webs composed of long parallel cables crisscrossed by shorter cables; webs ascending as sharply as the riggings of sailing vessels; and webs spun into hammock-like floating platforms. All the strands were thinner than a man's small finger, and shimmered strangely in the many-hued fluorescence of great light-patches on the ceiling; and somehow their iridescence, their shifting rainbow hues, their purples, ambers, aqua-marines, scarlets and turquoise blues, made them seem all the stranger and more sinister.

But most sinister of all were the great beings sprinting along the webs or dangling spider-like from a thread. Now for the first time Gates saw his captors clearly; for now—as he was later to learn—they had brushed off the powder that made them virtually invisible to human eyes, and stood forth in their full grotesqueness.

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Their outlines were what he had already seen: gigantic, spidery, with octopus limbs ending in many tentacle-like curling fingers. He had not known, however, that the monsters were encased in a scaly armor, which glittered with every peacock hue in the unearthly light, changing chameleon-like from ruby to emerald, and from gold and violet to bronze, jade and sulphur-yellow. He had not known that they had wide pouting greenish-gray lips, from which at times a faint smoke issued. He had not realized that they were equipped with long whips of tails, each ending in a horny dart, with which they could strike an enemy with appalling effect. He had not anticipated that they would talk with a peculiar whirr, a little like the grating of a buzz-saw; nor had he expected to see the pouches beneath their lower ribs, in which some of them, kangaroo-fashion, carried their young.

Scarcely had Gates been deposited in the Planetoid when he made still another discovery.

"Great heavens, look at Ronald!" he heard a familiar feminine voice. And, wheeling about, he found himself staring at Dunbar and Eleanor, who gaped at him not half a dozen yards away.

Both were, literally, as white as ghosts—wide-eyed as persons who have looked on unmentionable horror. Gates noticed that Dunbar's hair, usually so sleekly glossed, straggled in wild disorder; that his tie was a rag, and his coat buttons torn off as if in a struggle; while Eleanor's clothes were in rumpled disorder. Yet he noted with relief that neither captive, apparently, had been hurt.

"Thank God!" the girl explained. "You're whole and sound!"

"Even if a little mussed up," Dunbar forced out, with a wry grimace. "Good Lord! Why, his shirt is in ribbons! And his collar—"

But he was not to finish the sentence. For Gates suddenly cried out, with a sensation as if a boa constrictor had seized him about the chest. One of the monsters, its red eyes glaring balefully, had reached down and grasped him in its tentacles; and, with the manner of a master reprimanding a disobedient puppy, had begun to carry him away.

CHAPTER III

Red-Hood

STRAIGHT up and up a swinging ladder the prisoner was borne for scores of yards; while, as he gazed into the abyss and thought of the result if his captor's hold should slacken, his head reeled with vertigo.

But his terror was not for himself alone. Even as he was hurtled high in air, he glanced down and saw an octopus' arm wrapping itself about a feminine form. And fury and alarm for Eleanor's sake drowned out all self-concern. In a flash, as his persecutor wound his way through the webbed void, he relived the history of his acquaintance with Eleanor. He saw again that day, little more than a year ago, when she, fresh from college, had come to the laboratory; and recalled the great leap his heart had given, and how he had gone away thinking only of her. But a natural timidity had delayed his advances; while Dunbar, the silent, morose Dunbar, whom nobody liked, had not been so restrained. Could she not see that the man, though clever enough, was as self-centered as a porcupine? How could she have fallen for this schemer? Not that she had fallen for him absolutely! Though they had been seen together frequently, was she not always gracious to Gates? Yet the rivalry of the two men was bubbling way beneath the surface like acid.

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These thoughts, which passed through Gates' mind in much less time than it takes to repeat them, were interrupted by a peculiar squeal which his captor gave out as he reached one of the hammock-like floating platforms and released the victim. Clinging to this unsteady island high in air, an imminent peril of plunging into a two-hundred-foot gulf, the prisoner was not likely to attempt escape!

But even had there been anywhere to flee, he would have been held by the magnetism of a particularly large, sinister-looking pair of crimson eyes, which glowed from a monster who appeared, to Gates' startled gaze, to be at least twenty-five feet tall. A blood-red hood, placed upon the creature's many-hued mail, set him off from all his fellows; as did the air of autocratic command which, somehow, Gates sensed rather than observed directly.

While he stood gaping at this goblin, a sharp cry to his left caught his attention; and, wheeling about, he observed Eleanor and Dunbar being deposited at his side. Both were trembling, as well they might, after their journey up the web, but he thought he saw a glint of relief in the girl's eyes, as he gestured to her.

A long, portentous silence fell as the red-hooded brute glared at his victims. Gates had the sensation of standing before a judge about to pass sentence of execution.

Then there came a throaty rumbling, followed by a buzzing as of a multitude of bees; after which, to the hearers' incredulous amazement, these words rasped forth, in grossly accented yet quite recognizable English,

"Welcome, my guests! Welcome to our web!"

THE three humans stared at one another, their lips agape. Had they all gone crazy?

The red eyes of the beast gave a wicked twinkle. Somehow, with their triangular scarlet pupils, they seemed more diabolical than ever.

"Come, come, do you not return my greeting?" buzzed the creature; while a grating noise, which may have been laughter, came from his companions.

"How—how in thunder do you come to speak English?" sputtered Gates, feeling that he was but living through a nightmare from which he would soon awaken.

Again that grating noise, like harsh laughter.

"English—pooh! It is not hard to learn. It is not as if it were an advanced language," proceeded Red-Hood. "But you earthlings, with your minor-planetary minds, may not understand. Do you want me to explain?"

"Why not?" gasped Gates. But had he not steadied himself barely in time, he might have fallen off the platform.

"Well, it is all so very simple," went on the monster. "When arriving here, we covered ourselves with the powder Amvol-Amvol, which makes us invisible, or almost so. We then roamed your planet for many days, unseen by you, observing your habits, and listening to your conversations. Not being slow-witted like earth denizens, we were able to pick up the meaning of the words, which we held in our memories —memories that register everthing, and never forget. After all, it is not for nothing that we are gifted with Saturnian intellects."

"Saturnian?" demanded Dunbar.

"Yes, that is the word you would use, is it not? We come from the planet Olar-olargulu, the ringed one."

The hearers remained silent. After all, it had been evident from the first that the strangers had not been born on earth!

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"This is our first experience with the inferior globules," continued the speaker, in a voice like a growl. "We have never before spoken with any of you Nignigs, or lesser peoples. But of late centuries we of Saturn have become too numerous, even for the great-size of our native planet. So we have been looking for provinces to colonize. For various reasons, we have chosen the earth. As for Mars—it is too small to bother with. Jupiter, unfortunately, is too powerfully defended by its three-footed dwarfs. And Venus is too near the sun for comfort. So we are prepared to take over the earth."

"Take over—the earth?" demanded the three humans, in one voice.

"What else? After all, are we not entitled to it, by virtue of our superior intelligence?"

HIS hearers could merely stare in bewildered silence.

"Our method, you see, is simple. We have ferried these cars—which you call the Crystal Planetoids—all the way from Saturn, and placed them in positions to whirl about the earth as satellites, enabling us to drop down upon our future domains at leisure, while weaving our clogclotlas—"

"Your what?" demanded Gates.

"Pardon me," apologized Red-Hood, while a spout of smoke came from between his thick grayish-green lips, and his tail lashed out and shot its hornet dart to within half a dozen inches of the young man's face. "Pardon me—I had forgotten myself, and used a Saturnian term. Weaving our webs, I should have said. You see, it is necessary to spin these webs thoroughly through your entire atmosphere before choking out all the planet's native life."

The speaker had made this announcement in as quiet a manner as though he had merely foretold that tomorrow's weather would be rainy.

Hence his hearers were hardly able to take in his full dread meaning. They merely gaped at him as though he were perpetrating a ghastly joke.

"What! Do you doubt me?" rattled out the monster. "Beware lest I take offense! We Saturnians never lie to our inferiors."

This assertion was punctuated by another flick of the creature's tail, whose rapier-like barb barely missed Dunbar's nose.

"But you don't mean to say you would actually exterminate us—exterminate us all—" began Eleanor; then faltered, and halted in confusion.

"Why not? Would you earth-creatures hesitate to wipe out a hive of ants? Doubtless they too have minds, and even a civilization of a sort. But what is that to you? If they got in your way, would you not crush them?"

"So we are no more to you than ants?"

"Do not flatter yourselves. Why should we be sentimentalists, and spare you nignigs unless you can serve us?"

The puff of smoke that came from between the monster's lips, as he spat out these words, was so heavy that all three humans gasped, with the stench of sulphur in their nostrils.

"As I have said," he went on, "our clogclotlas, or webs, have been woven all through your atmosphere, checking the usual wind currents, and laying down a blanket that will enclose the planet's heat, until after a time every living creature will be baked or choked to death in one vast oven. Of course, like any other great engineering project, this will take time. We cannot expect to complete the good work in less than a year or two."

In Gates' disturbed fancy, it seemed that many-colored points of light, like little demons, danced malevolently upon

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the huge expanse of his captor's armor.

Yet there was just a trace of incredulity in his tone, as he demanded,

"If this is all true, why do you trouble to tell us about it? We for our part do not warn the ants we intend to trample!"

"Nor do we!" Red-Hood's words came in a snort, and his tail flicked through the air in an angry crackling. "But whether we will spare you or sting you to death remains to be seen!"

THE beast took a sudden step forward, and Gates found himself almost projected off the platform as the monster shot out at him,

"Do you not think we brought you to the Planetoid for a purpose? For a long while, have we not been looking for suitable earth-captives? No, not at first members of the common pack! We wanted prisoners who knew something of your science, rudimentary as that is. When you went to the roof down there to use your ray machine—the Infra-Red Eye, as you call it—you set up etheric vibrations that instantly attracted our attention. Your ability to produce such vibrations told us that you were the folk we were seeking. So we lost no time about capturing you."

During the moment of silence that followed, Dunbar turned toward Gates with unveiled enmity in his snapping black eyes.

"So!" he snarled. "It was your damned invention that got us into this mess!"

Gates made no reply; but an answer came from an unexpected direction.

"You should thank him, earth-man, for getting you into this mess. Because of his invention, you three may live while all other earth-creatures perish!"

"What in God's name would life on such terms be worth?" Gates demanded. But a sob to his left caught his attention; and, wheeling about, he joined Dunbar in trying to console the weeping girl.

With a contemptuous glint in his triangular eyes, Red-Hood stood looking on; but it was several minutes before he resumed,

"Life is dear to all creatures—and you will find it not worthless on our terms!"

"What are your terms?"

It was Dunbar who asked this question, while Gates felt a silent resentment against the other man leap up within him.

"They are really most reasonable," the monster announced, sliding back and forth on the web, while his scales clanked ominously. "You see, even after all we have done, we find it hard to work on earth. The air is much too thin. After we have thickened the atmosphere with a complete network, things will be different; but as yet we labor under great disadvantages. What we need are tanks of compressed air to help our breathing. Such compressed air can be supplied only by you earth-creatures, since in our haste, unfortunately, we neglected to bring our automatic condensers from Saturn. That is why we have captured you. And that is why we promise you your lives—if you will do us a little service."

Gates glared back at Red-Hood in unconcealed fury. That this creature, who was threatening to wipe out the human race, should ask for his assistance—the idea was too preposterous, too heinous for consideration! And he was glad to note, from the revulsion in Eleanor's face, that she felt no less shocked than he.

But it was in unbelief, swiftly turning to anger, that he heard Dunbar's low, even voice, inquire,

"And what little service do you want of us?"

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The gray-green lips of the Saturnian opened in a hideous grin.

"I knew from the first," he rasped, "that you earth-animals would be reasonable. Our proposition is simply this: we will release you all, on condition that, on your return to earth, you prepare great containers of compressed air, according to our directions. If you do this faithfully, we will see that your lives are spared even after the extinction of all other earth-creatures."

"And if we refuse?" demanded Gates.

Red-Hood took a menacing stride forward.

"You will not refuse!" he proclaimed, again with a puff of sulphur fumes. "For, in that case, you will suffer a fate a hundred times worse than death!"

With ominous rapidity, the monster's tail whipped out once more, flashing back and forth before all three captives. And Gates, edging again toward the webbed abyss, had a momentary idea of leaping over the brink. But even as this thought came to him, he felt an ice-cold arm lashing him in a firm grip. Harsh, loud and ironic, the monster's derision grated in his ears,

"Not yet, my friend, not yet! The road of escape will be long and spiky! The road of escape will be long and spiky for all who defy the will of Saturn!"

These words were emphasized by a peal of laughter, shrill, grating, diabolical, wherein all the onlooking monsters joined in one prolonged scream.

CHAPTER IV

"Cooperate—and Live!"

"EARTH-MEN, we are not impatient! We know your minds work like rusty hinges—but what else can be expected of the minor planets? So take a little time. Consult with one another. We will allow you half an hour. Then we will be back, and learn if you prefer to cooperate—or to die a thousand deaths!"

With an agile looping movement, Red-Hood started down one of the cable ladders, followed by all his retinue.

"One thing more!" he warned, noting how longingly Gates was staring into the abyss. "Take care not to fall off the platform! In that case, strong arms will be waiting to catch you—and your punishment will be heavy in proportion to the crime!"

"How heavy will that be?" defied Gates, wondering what they could do to him worse than they had already threatened.

Scarlet flashes shot from the monster's eyes. "One hundred of your kind," he snorted, "will be picked up from the streets of your cities, and crushed to death as hostages! Such is the vengeance of Saturn!"

As the creature left, with a low hissing as of escaping steam, Gates felt as never before that he was in contact with a force having nothing in common with humanity.

Silence ruled for a moment, while the three prisoners sat facing one another on their high swinging perch. But their horror-filled eyes were eloquent.

"God in heaven! I don't suppose there's much for us to decide!" mumbled Gates, grimly, while he stared as in a nightmare at the looping, criss-crossing intricacy of cables overhead.

"No, I'm sure not!" sighed Eleanor.

"Any idiot could see that!" Dunbar muttered. "Don't know what we need this half hour to think about!"

Another gloomy silence ensued.

"Well, at least I'm glad we're agreed," declared Gates, who, to tell the

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truth, was a little surprised at Dunbar's sudden manifestation of decent feeling.

"Wouldn't we be imbeciles not to be," Dunbar drawled, running a lean, long-fingered hand reflectively across his jutting chin. "All comes down, I guess, to a question of saving our own hides. As for me—I never did exactly hanker to shine as a martyr."

"Martyr?" echoed Gates. And all at once he knew the full enormity of Dunbar's treason—yes, knew beyond all need for further questioning!

At the same time, he noticed Eleanor's nauseated look.

"Goddamn it, Ronny, mean to say I got you wrong? So you folks are not with me after all?" demanded Dunbar, incredulously. "Deuce take you! I never thought you were that crazy!"

"If you call it crazy not to betray your whole race—"

"I'd like to know what in hell my whole race has ever done for me!" retorted Dunbar. "Lot it'll help them if I let myself be ground to bits by those snaky dragons! No, sirree, you can play the saint if you want to—but I'll think you're both hell-blasted fools. As for me—I'll cooperate—and live!"

"I'd rather be a hell-blasted fool than live with the world's blood on my hands. Wouldn't you, Eleanor?"

"A thousand times over!" attested the girl. And in her animated eyes, as she nodded assent, there was a warmth Gates hadn't observed in them before.

"You're letting your feelings rule you, Ronny, not your mind!" swore Dunbar. "That's the trouble with you—too infernal much of a dreamer! Can't face reality! Why, haven't I seen it in you all along? You haven't got the guts of a jellyfish! That's why I've despised you!"

THERE it was out in the open again, their antagonism flaring white-hot. Somehow it seemed strange, ludicrous that the three of them should be perched here, on the rim of eternity as it were, and be doing nothing better than air their personal enmities. Yet, after all, did Gates not know that Dunbar had always loathed him?

It was Eleanor's voice that broke the brief, bristling silence. Struggling to gain control of herself, she cast a defiant glance at Dunbar. "You are badly mistaken, Philip!" she defended, crisply, "if you think Ronald hasn't got, as you say, the guts of a jellyfish. I guess it doesn't take so much guts to be a traitor, the way you're planning, Mr. Dunbar! And let us both die while you go pleasantly along your way!"

Tears were in the girl's eyes; she had to avert her face violently to prevent a telltale overflow.

Dunbar's answer was a low, gruff laugh.

"Good Lord! What makes you think I'm willing to let you both die? Ronny can do what he damn well wants to—guess the world will outlive his loss. But you, my girl—do you think I'll let you be massacred just because most of our good-for-nothing species is due to be wiped out? Believe me, if there's going to be one man survive the slaughter, there'll be one woman too—just to start the new world right! Do you get me?"

As he crept nearer to her along the web, his little black eyes widened in a leer.

A quarter of an hour later, the full implications of his words became clear. Red-Hood and the other Saturnians had returned; and, ringing their captives about in a glittering circle, had demanded their decision. And Eleanor and Gates had defied them with a resolute "No!", regardless of the thunderous rumblings and the spouts of smoke that came from their masters' lips.

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But Dunbar took another track.

"Worthy visitors from Saturn," he said, with mincing gestures, "I am glad to co-operate with you. But, in return, I ask one small boon."

"What boon?"

"If I help you, O noble ones, I must do so without restraint. But this cannot be unless you grant me the favor I ask. You see, O Lords, we earth-men are so made that we cannot do our best work without a woman at our side. So I crave of you—spare the life of this female here; release her, so that she may labor with me!"

A snort from Red-Hood drowned out Eleanor's shocked protests.

"But this woman, O earthling, has refused to co-operate. She deserves the fate worse than death, which we have in store for her."

"Women, O Lords, are ever fickle and changeable of mind. If you will but spare her, I will see that she will co-operate."

The Saturnians held a brief conference among themselves, in tones like rapid gurglings. Then Red-Hood turned back toward Dunbar. "It is so, O Nignig! On our planet, too, the female of the species is fickle, and changes her mind like the lightning." And then, pointing scornfully at Gates, "Do you also ask us to spare your other companion?"

"Not so, O Lords! I ask the woman only!"

ELEANOR'S despairing cry was muffled amid the bellowing of the Saturnians, as they once more conferred, punctuating their debate with flashes of their many-colored armor, and with innumerable puffs of smoke . . . in a discussion that lasted for many minutes.

Finally, discharging sulphur fumes from little orifices at the ends of his long twining fingers, Red-Hood turned back to his Quisling.

"Let it be so!" he rattled out. "On one condition, we will release the woman. She will serve as a pledge for the faithful performance of your promise. If you fail us, by even the minutest fraction of a fraction of a degree, be sure she will not escape, but will perish along with you on the Barbs of Slow Agony!"

Eleanor gasped; and peering up into the relentless red eyes of her captors, knew that all protest would be futile.

"Zoltevi! Zoltevi! Quimboson!" she heard Red-Hood rasping, as one of his long tentacled arms motioned to two retainers. And after a brief interchange in their native tongue, the pair stepped forth, and she felt the octopus arms of one of the giants winding about her, while Dunbar was snatched up in the claws of the second.

"My followers will give you your instructions!" Red-Hood growled at his new servant; while Eleanor, with swimming head, felt herself being borne down the great swaying web.

"Have faith! Have faith! We will win out yet!" she thought she heard a familiar voice calling after her. Or was it that, in her bewilderment, she had only imagined? For her last glimpse at Gates showed him standing erect and defiant enough, but so feeble-looking, of such midget size beside the many-armed, tailed monsters that towered above him to the height of the great dinosaurs of vanished ages!

CHAPTER V

Paralyzed!

COMPARED with Gates as he stared up at his captors, Daniel in the lion's den may have considered himself almost among friends.

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For a moment after the departure of the two other humans along with Zoltevi and Quimboson, no sound was audible except that of the threshing, sighing cables, and of the deep, throaty breathing of the monsters.

Then in silence—a silence more terrible than any spoken threat—Red-Hood advanced toward his victim. Gates, sensing his sinister intention, spontaneously pressed back. But Red-Hood drew nearer still, this time with a ten-foot stride. And Gates retreated to the extreme outer edge of the platform. Another inch, and he would have fallen!

But before he could plunge to a welcome deliverance, his persecutor's long tail shot out. With a rapid whirring motion, sounding a little like the warning buzz of a rattlesnake, it flicked by his left arm. And this time it did not miss. A glancing stroke touched him painlessly, leaving an abrasion hardly more noticeable than the prick of a pin.

But instantly something else occurred —something all too noticeable! Gates felt a numbness shoot along the arm, which took on the lifeless feeling of a jaw into which a dentist has pumped several charges of novocain. And from the arm the feeling spread to his left shoulder, then over to the right shoulder, then down toward his abdomen, and up his neck, and along the right arm, and through both legs to the toes.

It all happened in a matter of seconds. Almost before he had had time to grasp the full dread facts, he found himself paralyzed. Yes, paralyzed practically completely! Except for a slight wriggling movement in his feet and fingers, he was unable to stir! In his horror, he attempted to cry out; but his tongue would not obey the impulse; all that came forth was a whisper-thin gurgling. Meanwhile, no longer able to maintain an upright position, he had sagged to the floor of the web, where he lay like a bundle of rags.

Strangely enough, however, the higher nerve centers appeared unaffected; his mind had not lost any of its clarity. It was, in fact, as though his mental reactions had suddenly been heightened, now that his physical frame was as if dead.

After a minute of silent gloating, during which he stood leering down at the victim, Red-Hood drew wide his green-gray lips, and huskily inquired,

"How do you feel now, O earthling? That was what we call a tail-prick. Had the blow struck beneath the surface, you would have perished. But that would not have served our purpose. You can do more for us alive than dead."

SAVAGE and determined was the secret compact that Gates made with himself: he would perish in agony, a hundred times over, sooner than voluntarily help his captors by so much as the flick of one finger!

But Red-Hood, as if aware of his thoughts, twisted those great bag-like lips of his into a sardonic grin, and grumbled,

"It will not be up to you, my friend, whether you assist us or not. You see, there is nothing you can do against Lethemaz—the poison we apply with the tips of our tails. For a hundred thousand cycles our scientists have worked, until it has become the most efficient venom in the universe. A tenth of a drop—which is just what we used —will keep a mite like you paralyzed for days, unless we apply the proper antidote."

To Gates' horrified consciousness there had come the memory of certain wasps which injected a paralyzing fluid into their spider prey, keeping them alive but helpless for an indefinite pe-

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riod, so that they might nourish the next wasp generation.

But the fate of the spiders seemed almost enviable beside his own. For they at least would at last know an end to their captivity!

As this thought shot through his mind, he heard Red-Hood conferring in undertones with two subordinates. And the latter, after a moment, approached him and produced long cables, which they began to twist and loop about his body. For what purpose? He could not even guess. Yet the wicked twinkles in their three-cornered red eyes told him that they were up to some new villainy. A minute later, when they began to carry him down the web, amid the shimmering many-hued strands, how fervently he wished that he had seized his opportunity before it was too late, and had fallen off the platform to his doom!

TWELVE hours had gone by. The Crystal Planetoid, whirling on its orbit about the earth, had swung back to the point at which the three humans had entered it. And a man and a girl, deposited by two invisible attendants, had found themselves back near the spot where their adventures had begun.

They had come down in a fog—which was not surprising, since fogs now hovered continually over the earth; and their exact point of descent was an isolated spot in a city park, a mile or two from the laboratory. Dunbar recognized the place with a satisfied grunt, as he identified a certain rustic bridge over a small stream. "Good! Just ideal for a little chat!"

It seemed as if a huge shadow drifted over them and away, and vaguely they were aware that the two Saturnians had departed.

"What is there to chat about, Mr. Dunbar?" she flung back haughtily.

There was a silken purr in the man's voice. But determination marked his manner as he imposed himself in the girl's path.

"Now listen here, young lady. There are several things you might as well understand. The first is that you must cooperate."

"Cooperate?" she tossed back, shrilly, and paused long enough for a contemptuous fling of laughter. "Why who wouldn't die sooner than cooperate with those beasts—those dev—"

He had come closer to her, and his voice was coaxing, almost caressing.

"Do you think it was for their sake, Eleanor? Why do you think I saved you, except for your own precious self? If you will only cooperate with me—with *me*—"

"I'd rather cooperate with a viper!"

She had recoiled as though he were indeed the creature she had mentioned; and he found it necessary to seize her arm in order to prevent her departure.

"Come, let's forget all this, Eleanor. I know what nervous stress you are under. When you return to yourself, you will realize all that I have done for you. If I hadn't said a word in your behalf—"

"In *my* behalf! Good heavens, man!" she retorted, bitterly. "Don't you think I could have saved my own life, if I had been willing to stoop to your kind of treason?"

"Treason or not, we shall see. We shall see. Meanwhile, I warn you, don't try to interfere when I fulfill my agreement—when I prepare those vats of compressed air—"

"And what if I report you to the authorities?"

"Report? By Christ! You wouldn't be that stupid? You wouldn't drive me to action against you, would you?"

His tone had become subtly menacing as he leaned over her, and whis-

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pered, almost furtively,

"Besides, have you not as much at stake as I, my girl? Remember, you are a pledge for my success. If I fail—"

"If you fail, I will give thanks to heaven!"

With a determined effort, she had thrust herself forward; while he, following through the fog, pleaded and expostulated, in tones half like a lover, half like a taskmaster. At length, through the mist, there came a choked sobbing. And thin and faint, where two enormous creatures stood invisibly amid the vapors, there sounded an eerie squeak, like the muffled mockery of demons.

CHIEF OF POLICE JOE McCULLOUGH had settled back to a good fat cigar and the latest issue of the "Sports Digest." His long legs stretched lankily across a chair; his heavy red face wore an expression almost of contentment, except when now and then he mopped the sweat from his brow with a crimson-bordered handkerchief. "Damn this heat!" he finally muttered, glaring at the electric fan as if to accuse it of criminal conspiracy. And just then the door opened, and the sandy head of Sergeant Johannsen intruded.

"Sorry to butt in, Chief, but a dame out here wants to see you."

McCullough let out a low oath. "Didn't I tell you I don't want to be pestered? See her yourself, Johannsen. You're no slouch when it comes to dames." And, with a growl, he turned back to the "Sports Digest."

"But she swears she's gotta see you, Chief. Just can't do a thing with her. Something damned important, she says."

"Tell her to go to hell!"

Even as he spoke, a woman's face poked itself through the doorway. It was a face naturally comely, with clear blue eyes, and handsomely chiselled chin and brow; but just now she looked like the victim of a cyclone. Her clothes were rumpled; her disordered hair hung far down her forehead; there were tear-stains beneath her eyes, which blazed with a wild, impatient light.

"Chief McCullough?" she demanded.

Had she been a man, she would have been ejected without debate. As it was, the Chief merely gaped at her, abashed, while awkwardly withdrawing his feet from their comfortable perch. "Yes, Ma'am. What can I do for you?"

"Something nobody else can do, Mr. McCullough. I know of a plot, sir—the most fiendish plot ever imagined. You'll hardly believe it, but I've just come down—well, down from one of the Crystal Planetoids, where they've hatched a scheme to capture the earth."

McCULLOUGH gaped, and let the "Sports Digest" drop from his hands. He had had experience with crazy women before, but never with one who had dug out a scheme to capture the earth. The best thing to do with her kind was to let them rave on. If you tried to interrupt them, they were apt to get hysterical.

And so it was with a polite but skeptical smile that he listened to her story of invaders as tall as a two-story house, who had enormous stinging tails and were invisible in ordinary light. Midway in her recital, he scowled reproof at Sergeant Johannsen, who seemed about to break out in open laughter; and, when she had finished, he thoughtfully took up his cigar, which he had put down for the moment, and remarked, with an attempt at courtesy,

"Well, now that's all too bad, Sister. The thing I'd advise you to do is to go home and sleep it off. These are queer times, you know. Why, with all this

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heat and tension, it's surprising we're not all seeing rattlesnakes and tigers. So you just have a good sleep, and tomorrow you'll feel better."

The girl stared at McCullough in dismay.

"But, my God, I'm not dreaming!" she insisted. "This is real—take my word for it, horribly real! There's a man—I can give you his name—who is working right now for the invaders, preparing tanks of compressed air. If you don't help—and immediately—"

She was interrupted by Johannsen, who, no longer able to contain himself, exploded in one mighty roar.

At the same time, she caught the amused glint in McCullough's eyes; and all at once she felt sick—sick to the very pit of her being. And, realizing the uselessness of further pleas, she turned without another word, and stumbled blindly toward the doorway.

CHAPTER VI

An Offering from the Clouds

AT almost any other time in modern history, the disappearance of a promising young scientist would have created a sensation. As it was, the newspapers were so preoccupied with other events that they merely noted incidentally that "Ronald Gates, a technician employed by the Merlin Research Institute, has dropped mysteriously out of sight. No clue to his whereabouts has been found either at his lodgings or his place of employment. Suspicions of suicide, and of kidnaping for ransom, have not been confirmed."

Yet hardly was this story printed when extraordinary rumors began to be heard. So wild, so fantastic were the tales that most hearers shook their heads skeptically; newspapers denied them space; and even the most credulous old wives found belief stretched to the breaking point. But there were many who swore to the authenticity of the accounts. Ronald Gates, they attested, had been seen again; had been seen dangling in air, like a fly in a spider's web! About him were thin shimmering strands, which vanished into a mist; while he himself swung not many feet above the earth, was both gagged and bound. Some declared that he was inert, and dead as a stone; but others averred that they had seen him making frantic movements with his feet, and with the tips of his fingers.

Among the few who listened seriously to these reports was Eleanor Firth. Rousing herself from the sick bed in which she had been confined for two days, suffering from what the doctor diagnosed as "nervous delusions," she set out toward the field at the outskirts of town, where, she had been told, the dangling apparition had been seen.

As she left the house, a skulking form slunk from behind a tree half a block away; and slithered to the nearest phone booth. She did not see the figure; but thought that it was by a queer coincidence that, after she had boarded a street car ten minutes later, she saw a taxicab just keeping pace with the trolley, and inside the vehicle recognized the slim dark shape of Dunbar.

At first she thought of turning back. But thinking that she might have made a mistake in identification, or that Dunbar might turn off in some other direction without seeing her, she continued on her way.

Twenty minutes later, when the car had reached its terminal, the taxicab was still a little behind.

But she could give little thought just then to the cab and its occupant. Through the mist she saw some vacant lots about a hundred yards away, where a crowd was assembled. And, with a

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fluttering heart, she pressed forward, racing rather than walking toward the crowd in the field.

AT the outskirts of the throng she joined the others in staring vaguely upward into the hazes, although at first she saw nothing.

"Why, he just seems to come and go," she heard a neighbor remarking. "Dips down, and then pops up again like a jack-in-the-box. You'd think he was held on strings."

"There he is!" a child cried out, eagerly. "Oh, Mamma, look! He's upside down!"

Surely enough, a figure was drifting out of the dense ceiling of fog. It was a figure as stiff and lifeless-looking as a manikin, except for the spasmodic twitching of the feet and fingers. And it was, as the child had exclaimed, upside down! Nothing could be weirder or more unnatural-looking than the way in which it slowly approached, in a diver's posture, with its arms outspread beneath it, and its feet uppermost. Obviously, it was supported by unseen hands or cables; yet Eleanor, no matter how she strained her eyes, could catch no glimpse of those cobweb strands which, she knew, encompassed it in a thick web.

For a moment or two, as she stared in a ghastly fascination, recognition did not come to her. Then all at once she cried out in astonished, dreadful certainty. That frank, open face, with the aquiline nose and broad, high forehead; those masses of coffee-brown hair, lying dishevelled along the brow—how could she help recognize them, even though the tanned skin was covered with a dense stubble, and the once-mobile features looked inflexible as marble!

"Ronny! Ronny!" she exclaimed, sagging for support against a fat woman, who grumbled at her aberrations. And even as she spoke, she thought that she was answered by a glint in the eyes of the floating apparition. Yes, surely there was a responsive gleam! a vivid, deep fire which no paralysis could quench! She knew; she knew that Ronny had seen her, had recognized her!

But, at the same time, his eyes were kindled with such sorrow, such suffering that she thought of a martyr writhing at the stake.

Downward he floated, until he dangled but ten or twelve feet above her head. Only ten or twelve feet, she thought, yet what infinities between them! But almost immediately, he began to retreat. Jerked by the unseen cords, he slowly arose, was gradually pulled around to a horizontal position, and mounted until by degrees he was lost in the mist. And, all the while, from the watching crowd, came cries of wonder and amazement.

But just as the figure disappeared, Eleanor noticed something hardly less extraordinary. She could have sworn that, a moment before, a man had stood just to her right, had pressed almost elbow to elbow with her; and she knew that he had not strolled away. Yet suddenly she heard a groan from where he had been; then a swift swishing; and, turning, found that he was gone. Literally, he had vanished into thin air!

The next moment, when a frightened woman began crying, "John, John, where are you? For goodness' sake, where are you, John?" it seemed inevitable that there should be no response.

BUT her mind had no chance to dwell upon the incident. For she felt some one tapping her upon the shoulder; and, turning, stared into the dark, sardonically grinning face that she wished to see least of all faces on earth.

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How she hated him for the triumphant leer with which he devoured her! How she detested the manner in which he spoke, bowing urbanely, and with an ironic purr in his voice! "Ah, Eleanor! Nice to meet you here!" Somehow, she had the feeling of a bird in the fowler's hands!

"What a piece of good luck for us both, meeting like this!" he murmured. "Better step over this way, Eleanor, there are some things to talk over."

"I can't imagine what!" she denied.

But she caught the warning glint in his eyes. "Be unreasonable, young lady, and I don't answer for the consequences!"

In any case, she reflected, she could not stand here arguing with him; could not make a public spectacle of herself. And so, choking down the voice of inner warning, she followed him toward the waiting taxicab.

As they started off, a cry rang from the crowd; and, looking up, she saw the dangling figure emerging again from the mist. Strangely, it was propelled—almost thrust—in her direction, until it floated a mere half a dozen feet overhead. The face, as before, was rigid as rock, but the eyes glared with anger—anger fierce, vehement, concentrated, which seemed to focus in two fierce fire-points of light. Eleanor noticed how Dunbar, after a single glance, winced and turned away—slunk away, it seemed to her, in the manner of a whipped hound.

Upon reaching the taxicab, the girl hesitated. That warning voice, stronger now and more insistent, bade her not to enter. But the man's tones, soft and coaxing, appealed, "There's something I must tell you—I *must*, Eleanor, if you want to save yourself and our friend up above."

The plea for herself alone would not have sufficed; but at the reference to Ronald she felt herself yielding.

"Come, let's drive around town a while—anywhere at all you say," he suggested, "before having you taken back home."

After all, she thought, what harm in driving around a bit? She was almost exhausted, and it would be so much easier not to have to go home by trolley! Besides, she was so faint that there was little power in her to resist Dunbar's will.

And so she found herself preceding him into the cab, although still that warning voice cautioned, "Don't! Don't! Don't!"

"Anywhere around the suburbs," Dunbar instructed the driver. And then the door slammed, and they were on their way. But, as the wheels whirred beneath her, she would have given her last penny to be safely on the ground again.

Subtly, insidiously, her companion's manner had changed. There was a menacing note beneath the silken purr as he turned to her, and demanded, "And now, young lady, maybe you will tell me why you have not been cooperating?"

SHE writhed; withdrew from him as far as possible; and made no answer. How idiotic of her to have let him lure her into the taxi!

"Maybe you will tell me," he went on, "why it was you went to the police to report me? No! don't say you didn't! I have informants!"

"That is to say, you've been shadowing me with spies, Mr. Dunbar?" she retorted, turning upon him with spirit.

"I don't care a damn what you call it!" he snarled. "Simple fact is I couldn't afford to take any chances. But I really didn't think you'd be imbecilic enough to report me—since we're both in the same boat. If the Saturnians

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murder me, they murder you too! Remember that!"

"So that's what you decoyed me into the car to say, Mr. Dunbar?"

"I didn't decoy you. But I did want to warn you. If you give me your solemn promise, Eleanor, to keep a tight lock on your tongue, and not interfere with me any further, I'll let you go about your way. But not unless!"

"I don't propose to argue with you, Mr. Dunbar!" Her tones were slow, incisive, cutting. "Now if you'll have the kindness to give the driver my address—"

"Not so fast there, my girl! We've still got some things to thresh out. Just because you don't seem to care about your own life, it doesn't follow I'm going to let you throw mine away!"

At last the mask was falling off. He glared; his teeth bit into his lower lip; his manner was truculent. "Good Lord, Eleanor, don't you know those Saturnians are watching everything you do? How long do you think their patience will last? What do you suppose old Red-Hood will do when he finds you're all set to betray him?"

"Betray *him?*" Scornfully she laughed. "So that's the only betrayal you're thinking of? Now will you kindly give that driver my address?"

He made no move to obey.

"If you won't, then I will!" she decided, starting up.

But a powerful hand had seized her, and thrust her back. "I tell you, my girl, we've got to thresh this out!"

"I tell you, there's nothing to thresh out!"

Before her inner vision there flashed again a figure, with pain-tormented eyes, who dangled helplessly high in air. And she clenched her fists, and secretly swore a bitter oath.

"So then it's not peace, but a sword?" he flung out, as if reading her thoughts. "In that case, you force me to act in self-defense!"

Despite the quietness of his manner, she was becoming more and more frightened. His heart fluttered; she remembered again that voice of warning which she had not heeded; and felt suddenly too weak and helpless to make the attempt—the obviously futile attempt—to call out to the driver.

From an inner pocket he had pulled a little vial filled with a dark-brown fluid. And, from another pocket, he drew a hypodermic neede.

"Lucky for us both that, being a chemist, I can prepare my own formulas," he went on, with an oily drawl. "Now this won't do you any real harm, Eleanor, so I'd advise you not to struggle. That will only make it harder for you, and not help at all in the end."

"For God's sake," she screamed, "what are you going to do?"

Wildly she stared out of the taxicab, with some vague idea of yelling for help or jumping. But they were speeding along an almost houseless suburban road, with not a person in sight; and to attempt to jump, even if she should succeed, would be mere suicide.

Meanwhile he had dipped the needle in the brown fluid, and she saw its thin, sinister point approaching.

"Just hold out your arm," he advised. "It will be all over in a second."

She was to remember hazily that she attempted a shriek, which was muffled by his throttling hand. She was to remember that she struggled spasmodically; beat at her oppressor with blind, self-protective fury. But this was all that she did recollect . . . aside from the fact that there came a sharp stabbing sensation just above her wrist . . . followed by a shooting pain in her head, an overwhelming dizziness, a reeling and swaying, and, suddenly and mercifully, a black, dreamless unconsciousness.

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CHAPTER VII

Prisoners' Progress

LETHEMAZ, the paralyzing drug of the Saturnians, had one quality for which Gates was sometimes thankful, and which sometimes he bitterly cursed. Despite the total incapacity of his body, his brain, as we have seen, was able to work with new keenness and clarity. Yet his increased mental awareness only added to his agony. For it made him see the horror, the helplessness of his plight in even more pitiful sharpness.

Eleanor had been right in supposing that his eyes had glowed with recognition as he dangled in air above her. She had been right in believing that he had glared at the sight of Dunbar. But she could not have known what torment seethed behind that rigid brow of his. She could not have known the tantalizing madness of one who, hour after hour, realizes that he is being used as a tool for the furies of destruction, yet is powerless to speak or act. Nor could she have guessed what dire new discoveries the captive had made.

From time to time Gates was carried back to the Crystal Planetoid, where a sting from one of the monsters' tails applied a deparalyzing fluid. Thus he found occasional relief—which, however, was not to be credited to any feeling of mercy on the part of the captors. No! for he could not be fed while paralyzed. And thanks to the way in which he was jolted around, he had to be given food every few days if he was not to perish.

As yet, it was not only the purpose of the invaders to keep him alive, but to obtain as many living humans as possible. Dozens of men and women, as he saw to his dismay, had been brought to the Planetoid and paralyzed. Like flies tangled in the webs of gigantic spiders, the victims lay scattered about the webs. And Gates realized that he was, in a sense, responsible. Yes, he had been the unwilling tool to trap them; it was as a bait that he had been dangled above the earth, . . . so that, when the people congregated beneath, the Saturnians might take their pick and whisk the victims away while the crowd was too preoccupied to be aware what had happened.

But why did they desire so many humans? Gates had the boldness to put this question to Red-Hood during one of his de-paralyzed intervals; and, to his surprise, the monster immediately rasped out an answer:

"Nignig, surely you have not the brains of a gnat, else you would have guessed! We capture you earthlings so as to dangle you above the earth as a lure to capture other earthlings!"

"And why capture other earthlings?"

"Why?" The giant's red eyes twinkled with amusement, as at a child who persists in asking the ridiculous. "Naturally, we want specimens of all the human fauna, of every race and color, so that we may skin and dry them in the interest of science, and bring them back to Saturn as specimens for the Museum of Unnatural History."

Noting the horror with which Gates greeted this explanation, Red-Hood went on to state,

"After all, Nignig, you should be grateful to us for seeking to preserve some trace of your species, instead of obliterating it entirely. You earth-creatures have no sense of gratitude!"

Thanks to this information, Gates' mind was more busy than ever with the problem of circumventing the Saturnians. His first thought was to destroy his own value to them by means of a hunger strike. But the result was that his food, in liquid form, was forced

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down his throat; while the Saturnians, apparently fearing that he would resort to other means to take his own life, vigilantly followed his every movement.

Nevertheless, after a time, an idea did come to him—an idea that at first appeared wild and impossible, and yet seemed to offer the only prospect, however remote, of regaining his freedom.

BUT before he could try out the scheme, matters on earth went from bad to worse.*

To say that the world was frantic would be to understate. Who of us that lived through those cataclysmic days will ever forget how men walked the streets with white, harried faces, their beards untended, their clothes in soiled disarray? Who will ever forget the sense of being at a world's end? Who will not shudder again as he recalls the appeals made to scientists by government officials—the desperate appeals headlined in the papers and blared through the radio: "As you value your lives, find the cause of the disturbance! Find the cause of this monstrous distortion of nature! Give us a remedy! Give us a remedy soon, soon—or it will be too late!"

But scientists labored hard and long—labored fifteen or eighteen hours a day, and found no remedy. Some, in fact, maintained that no remedy was possible. Who that is now of middle age cannot re-live the day when Dr. Arnold Woodrum, of the Cyclops Observatory, let it be known in an interview that he believed the Solar System to be passing through a region of space crossed by radio-active forces, which would gradually raise the temperature until all life was burned to a crisp? In the absence of any more definite knowledge, this view was widely accepted. And prayers and lamentations became universal.

It is a never-to-be-forgiven crime that the one man who, in these circumstances, could have poured out valuable information, was a man who kept his lips tight-shut.

IN A private laboratory improvised in his apartment, Philip Dunbar was hard at work. Motors buzzed about him; tubes and wires were woven intricately across the room; while dark hissing vapors and spouts of steam issued from numerous valves and retorts. Piled deep in one corner, were dozens of great torpedo-shaped steel tubes, some of them sealed, some of them ending in complicated coils of rubber tubing; and it was to these that the worker gave his chief attention.

After several hours, Dunbar paused; sighed; mopped his sweaty brow;

* Daily the unexplained thickening of the atmosphere was growing more noticeable. Daily the air was becoming heavier, more sluggish, more humid, and hotter. Thunder storms of greater violence than ever had become of daily occurrence in widely scattered sections of the earth. Droughts in some regions, and floods in others, had scarred the surface of the planet. Temperatures running well into the hundreds were now common in districts where eighty had been considered hot. Some sections, indeed, had become uninhabitable.

By the first of August, the deaths ascribed to the heat in the great cities of the eastern United States had risen to a daily average of scores of thousands. Mass migrations were in progress from tropical and sub-tropical regions—by every obtainable device, by liner, freighter and tugboat, by private car, truck and airplane, the inhabitants of South and Central America were streaming toward the temperate and polar regions. In India, scores of millions were flocking into the Himalayas; in Africa, the population was perishing like ants, and no count of the mortality was even attempted; in the South Seas the customary trade winds did not blow, and the waters became too warm for bathing. For the first time in history the Antarctic Continent, its glaciers beginning to melt, offered promise of becoming habitable; while men of daring laid plans to establish winter homes in Labrador and Greenland. Meanwhile vast once-verdant sections of America, Asia and Europe had been seared to a leafless brown. —Ed.

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turned a switch that sent the motors groaning to a halt; and, after unlocking the door, stepped into an adjoining room.

There he was confronted by a girl who, her hands joined behind her back and her teeth biting into her lower lip, had been pacing slowly back and forth.

She cast him a scornful glance, and continued ranging the floor.

"Listen, Eleanor!" he said. "You don't have to carry on like this. Don't act like a prisoner. Make yourself at home. In that case in the foyer, you'll find some mighty interesting books—"

There was fury in her manner as she turned upon him. "Well, what am I but a prisoner? Do you want me to bow down and thank you for keeping me locked here these last seven days?"

His tone was quiet, restrained, almost reproachful.

"But what do you expect, Eleanor? Surely, you understand the circumstances—"

Her blue eyes blazed. He had never before noticed how strong was the curve of her chin, how firm the set of her jaw. "Circumstances?" she derided. "All that I understand is that you drugged me—kidnapped me—brought me here forcibly, with the help of that hireling of yours, the taxi driver—"

"I've heard all about that before," he broke in, still without losing control of himself. "I know I've behaved rudely, Eleanor. But, after all, why not give me credit for some things? Haven't I treated you decently here? Have I so much as touched you with one finger, even though all the while I've been burning with love?"

She shuddered, and recoiled.

"Why do you act as if I were dirt beneath your feet?" he rushed on. "Haven't I done everything to make you comfortable? Haven't I fed you properly? My God, Eleanor!, don't you know I love you?"

He had pressed toward her, his eyes hot and desirous, while she had backed into the remotest corner of the room.

"And you expect *me* to love a traitor?" she shot at him. "Am I to sit by and adore you for playing Quisling to the whole Earth?"

"That isn't fair, Eleanor!" he protested. "Why, most girls would feel indebted to me for life for saving them. You will too, never fear! You're just a little hysterical now, that's the trouble. But come, come, a little kiss is what you need to soothe you!"

SHE saw the black-moustached face drawing closer. She saw the black eyes sparkling with predatory glee. She knew that in an instant the long twining fingers would be feeling their way about her. And she realized the futility, the folly of calling out for help. Nevertheless, a scream was upon her lips.

Then, when already she could feel his breath, hot and fetid as that of some beast of prey, relief came from an unexpected quarter.

A sharp sudden rattling and snapping sounded from the direction of the laboratory. And through the open door she could see how, miraculously, the laboratory window flew open as if in a violent gale, although not the slightest breeze was blowing.

Dunbar, hearing the noise, wheeled about, and gasped.

"By Christopher, how'd that happen?"

Then solemnly, after a moment, he added, "Why, I could swear I locked that window this morning!"

As if in answer, several thick steel rods on the laboratory table began to dance back and forth like dry leaves in the wind.

"Holy Jerusalem!" he ejaculated,

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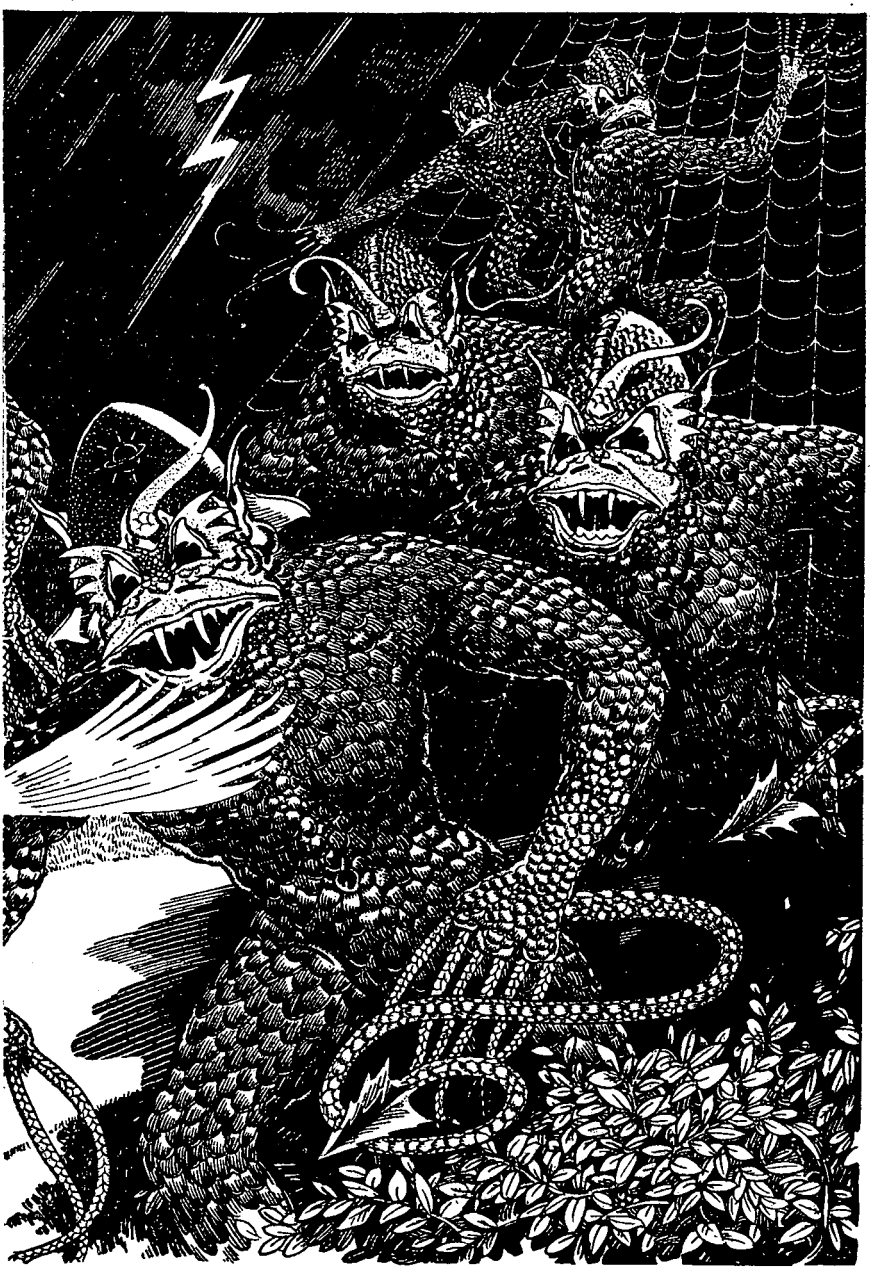

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backing away. "Am I going crazy?"

"No, nignig, you are no crazier than ever!" returned a rasping voice, seemingly from nowhere. "But we have been paying you a visit of inspection."

The two hearers stood with wide-open mouths, speechless.

"I am Quimboson, the servant of the Peerless Red One," went on the invisible. "I am perched outside your window now, on a web you cannot see. Finding the window closed, I pulled it open. One of my hands is in the room, shuffling these little objects on the table. I can reach in wherever I wish. Shall I prove it?"

Feeling the sudden pressure of a clammy paw against his brow, Dunbar was quite convinced.

Now all at once the tone of the invisible became harsher, more menacing.

"Earthling," he growled, "I am much displeased! The tail of the Peerless Red One will lash out in wrath when he hears my report. For instead of attending to your duties, we find you in dalliance with the female of your species!"

"But only for a moment!" pleaded Dunbar, in a cowed manner.

"A moment too much! I always thought it was a mistake to spare the female. When I tell the Peerless Red One, he will order her to be stung to death! Stung to death instantly! So I shall recommend, O earthling, and the Peerless Red One always takes my advice on these minor matters!"

Eleanor's gasp of horror was drowned out by Dunbar's appeal.

"But you've got to spare her, O Quimboson! Otherwise, how can I do my best work? On my oath! I shall waste no more time with her—"

"Your oath, O earthling, is as a sword of sand! But no more of this empty talk! I go now—I go!"

There came a whirring and a screeching, sounding oddly like mocking laughter; then the laboratory window banged to a close, and all became silent.

IT was several minutes before Eleanor, her face white, turned to Dunbar. "For God's sake, don't you see—don't you see, you *must* let me go! They'll be back here—they'll be back soon, and strike me dead—"

But Dunbar had returned to the laboratory, where he had switched on the motors.

"If I do let you go, they'll strike *me* dead!" he snapped back. "Lord! Haven't you gotten me into trouble enough already?"

So speaking, he slammed the door with a violent jerk.

Eleanor, sinking into a chair, her head buried in her hands, was driven more sharply than ever against the same dreary problem that had baffled her during all these days of captivity. How escape? The single door to the apartment was securely barred. The single accessible window gave upon a concrete court four stories beneath—and, lest she be tempted to leap out, her approach was impeded by a barbed wire barricade. Telephone connections had been cut—and there was no neighbor to whom she could call through the sound-proof walls. No! she was utterly balked!

Still, what matter that she might die a little ahead of the mass of mankind? After all, that was of no importance—but what might be vital was her chance to warn others of Dunbar's crime against humanity, if only she could escape! True, she had already tried to give warning, and had merely been laughed at; yet she had lately conceived a new idea, which might offer a dim hope if once she were free.

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Half swooning with the heat, she heard through the laboratory door the whirring of motors; and her head ached dully, and she burst into tears, for the dead have as much chance of rising as she had of beating down the monstrous forces ranged against her.

CHAPTER VIII

The Revolt of Yellow-Claws

HOUR after hour Gates had been watching his captors. Hour after hour he had been scheming, observing, hoping. With the heightened mental quickness of his paralyzed state, he was searching for a weak spot in the armor of the foe. "Surely," he reflected, "there must be some flaw that makes them vulnerable." And it was this thought that put him on the track of the wild idea that appeared to offer his only prospect of freedom.

By carefully following everything the invaders said and did, he was able to grasp the meaning of many words and phrases in their language. Even with his remarkable new rapidity of apprehension, he learned no more than a four-year-old might learn of English—yet this little went far, particularly as the enemy did not suspect that any mere earthling could be so intelligent.

But it was his eyes and not his ears that enabled him to fathom the secret of the Saturnians' greatest power: their ability to make themselves invisible. Whenever one of the monsters wished to vanish from sight, he merely dusted himself with a pale-blue powder from a purple-veined container. Evidently the powder—acting somewhat like a catalyzing agent—had the effect of causing the rays of light to pass completely through any object, thereby rendering it invisible. But did it make things invisible also to Saturnian eyes? The answer was in the affirmative: a Saturnian dusted with Amvol-Amvol could not be seen by any of his fellows, nor could the webs and cables, when concealed beneath this substance, be observed by their makers.

This was, however, of little importance to Red-Hood and his followers; for they relied upon sight much less than did human beings. They were guided largely by what they called the Communication Sense: certain vibrations in the air, set up by their tails, were recorded by a bulging organ just under the left ear of each of the creatures; and thus they were able to learn of their whereabouts and doings of their kindred even when they could not be seen.

So, at least, Gates concluded after long and careful observation. And his scheme for escape was built upon this knowledge.

BUT for a long while the plan did not take definite shape. And meanwhile he came to realize more keenly than ever how dangerous it would be to provoke his masters needlessly.

For they had surpassingly quick and violent tempers; their rage was, literally, like a tornado. Many a time Gates, lying helpless in paralysis on a web in the Planetoid, was the terrified witness to one of their disputes. He was seldom able to decide just what the quarrel was about, the first that he ever knew of it was when a blast like a siren ripped a this eardrums. Then other siren blasts would follow; then spouts of smoke would leap through the air, and the acridness of sulphur would torment his nostrils; then, if he were in a favored position, he would see the adversaries facing one another, their tails lashing the atmosphere in long loops and spirals, their octopus arms threshing and writhing, while the screeching

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and bellowing would rise to a crescendo as of battling fiends, and the eyes of the competitors would blaze with fiery red flashes.

There was one fight, in particular, which Gates would never forget. As usual, he had at first no idea of the cause; but the tumult this time was more diabolical than ever before. Paralyzed, he hung on a web several hundred feet above the floor of the Planetoid, in a grandstand position to view the affray. Among the lower meshes and cables, directly beneath him, Red-Hood stood amid steamy clouds of gas. And opposite him was an almost equally huge Saturnian, whose distinguishing features, as Gates saw it, was the clay-yellow coloration of his long tentacle-like claws.

For a tense minute the two creatures stood opposite one another, like bulls ready to charge. Then out shot Red-Hood's tail, striking with a crash against the rainbowed armor of the foe. And Yellow-Claws' breast was streaked with a golden-yellow spurt of blood; and crimson fires shot from his lips in curling tongues. Wrathfully his own tail lashed out, but missed his antagonist, who had leapt back with hair-trigger agility; while from Red-Hood's throat came such a howl that the very web trembled.

Gates was aware that a score of Saturnians stood watching intently below, at a safe distance, like spectators about a prize ring. He heard them whirring with excitement as the two opponents fended for positions. Then, to his astonishment, he saw Red-Hood springing forward, his octopus arms outspread, like some monster of a nightmare. Yellow-Claws was ready for the onslaught; and for a moment the two furies clashed, wrestling with hurricane vehemence . . . so that they seemed little more than a gigantic whirl of squirming, rotating, threshing arms, legs and tails.

But soon, with an unearthly cry, one of the creatures detached himself, and with cyclonic speed darted up the web. So swiftly did he travel that at first Gates was unable to determine that it was Yellow-Claws that fled, while Red-Hood pursued close behind. Up and down and sideways along the web, with all manner of athletic twists and wrigglings, the embattled pair rushed, now scores of feet above the observer, now hundreds of feet beneath. Once Yellow-Claws lost his grip and fell, but, with gymnastic swiftness, clutched at a dangling cable, and saved himself barely in time. Once, slashed in the neck by Red-Hood's tail, he let out such a roar that Gates thought he had been slain. Once it was Red-Hood who, torn by his opponent's tail, yelled in agony. Several times the rivals were screened from one another amid smoke clouds.

Yet it was but a few minutes before the fight was over. Yellow-Claws, one of his arms almost half severed, waved his tail high in air, and uttered a shrill, "Wikyi! Wikyi! Wikyi!" (I give up! I give up!") And Red-Hood, with a contemptuous snort, lashed out at him for a final time; and then, acknowledging the conclusion of peace, screamed triumphantly, and majestically stalked away.

BUT for hours the defeated giant sat on a web just below Gates, tending his wounds. His armor had lost its iridescence; thick smears of golden-orange covered its gashed surface. Yet Yellow-Claws' three-cornered eyes blazed with unsubdued anger; and his greenish-gray lips were twisted into grimaces of hate. Vengefully he muttered to himself, ignoring the presence of an earthling in the web above; vengefully he muttered three words, "Zugavl!

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Zugavl! Zug!"

Gates did not need to know the meaning of these expressions; from the manner in which they were uttered, he was sure that they boded no good for the Peerless Red One.

At about the same time, he made another important observation. Fighting was not the only bad habit of the Saturnians; they were subject to a far worse vice: that of inhaling Kishkash. This word, which was constantly on the monsters' lips, referred to the fumes from the burning of a certain dried leaf from Saturn. Nothing like it had ever been known on earth; a single whiff was enough to give Gates nausea; it had the foulest odor that had ever attacked his nostrils, being like the concentrated stench of putrefaction.

Yet to the Saturnians it was ambrosia. They never tired of sitting over little pots of the glowing substance, greedily drawing the smoke into their lungs, amid sighs and grunts of satisfaction. And the effect upon them was, to say the least, peculiar: after a time, they would fall into a stupor, and would lie on their backs on the floor, kicking their legs and lashing out with their arms and tails, evidently unable to control their own movements. Some of them, in fact, spent half their time in this state of delicious drunkenness.

It was from this fact that Gates hoped to profit. Eagerly he watched for his opportunity; and one day, when he was fortunately in a deparalyzed state, the chance arrived. It had been a time of celebration, in commemoration of a Saturnian holiday, honoring the great hero Dupepu, who, it seems, had wiped out seventeen nations; and Kishkash, which was considered indispensable on all festal occasions, had been burned with exceptional lavishness. As a result, every visible Saturnian lay on the floor of the Planetoid, kicking up his heels, while whirring and mumbling the delicious nonsense of intoxication.

Here, Gates instantly realized, was a heaven-sent opportunity. Left unguarded for the first time, he crawled down from the swinging platform where he had been placed for safekeeping; and, risking his life on a long rope-ladder, made his way to a portion of the web featured by several round dangling purple pouches. In these bags, he had observed, the natives kept their Amvol-Amvol, the powder of invisability. Once he had obtained this, his scheme would be already half consummated!

And what was to keep him from the Amvol-Amvol? Could he believe his senses?—believe that the precious substance was unwatched, and free for the taking? Yes! This seemed actually to be the case! Barring the remote possibility that one of the Saturnians would revive in time to interfere, there was nothing between him and his goal!

SO down and down he climbed, along the interwoven meshes of swaying, shimmering cables; down like a seaman descending the riggings of a vessel. At length he had reached the pouches. The nearest of them, as large as a watermelon, was within arm's grasp. The top, moreover, was wide open! And, inside, he could see the sky-blue powder that for days he had dreamt of obtaining!

Yet for just a second he hesitated. He could not guess what it was that chilled his hand; that restrained for a moment his desire for the magical substance. Was it some voice of hidden warning? He could not say. He only knew that he laughed silently at himself; then, with reviving eagerness, shot his hand into the pale-blue dust.

The substance was downy soft to the touch, yet was cold as stone, and caused

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a tingling, faintly stinging sensation to creep along his skin. Hungrily his fingers closed over it; then, with a good handful in their clutch, began to withdraw.

But, as they did so, Gates was startled by a sudden grating noise, followed by a sharp click. And a violent pain shot through his wrist. Teeth of steel dug into his flesh; and, in horrible realization, he knew that he was caught!

Yes, caught like a wild beast snared in a wolf-trap! It is hard to say whether, in that first stunned instant, his pain or his alarm was the greater. Yet his mind at once took in the full dread import. The pouch was but a ruse; it was equipped with hidden jaws, which would close at the faintest touch, seizing the unwary intruder. Oh, why had he not had the brains to beware?

From the first, he saw that escape would be impossible. Those cruel jaws were so made that the more he struggled, the more tightly his arm would be wedged between them, and the more intense his agony—if he were not careful, his other wrist would be caught too! Knowing that he would be fettered here until his masters revived from their intoxication; and knowing also the terrible tempers of the tribe, he concluded that he would be better off dead.

It was as this thought bored at his brain that he heard a sound to his left. Low, stealthy, secretive, it yet had a vaguely familiar whirr. "Earthling, listen to me!"

His heart gave a convulsive leap. He felt that his last moment had come. So he had not been alone after all, had not been unguarded! One of his captors, garbed in invisability, had been watching him, following his every movement, gloating in his helplessness as a cat gloats in the sufferings of a mouse!

"Earthling, listen to me!"

The words had been repeated, in the same stealthy manner.

"For God's sake, who are you?" the prisoner found courage to gasp.

"Soon I shall say. First, let me free you from your misery."

THERE came a snapping sound; the steel jaws clattered apart; and Gates, to his astonishment, withdrew a bruised and bleeding wrist.

"The lower animals should not meddle with tools they do not understand!" mumbled the unseen. "By my home-world's outer ring! you did not pull down the safety clasp before sticking in your hand!"

"But who—who in blazes are you?" repeated the captive, becoming bolder, although he could not believe that he had been freed for any good purpose.

"Who am I?" The speaker paused long enough for a burst of low whirring laughter. "I am Misthrumb, though that means nothing to you. I am he who fought yesterday with the Peerless Red One, and was driven off, may the curse of the Nine Planets fall on his foul bosom!"

"Oh—you mean, Yellow-Claws?"

"Yellow-Claws? Well, you may call me that, for my hands are of the soil yellow of royalty! My blood too is yellow, golden-yellow! I am as high-born as the Peerless Red One. Was I not designated by the Grand Potentate, the Barbelcoppi, to share the leadership of this expedition? And has the Peerless One not denied me at every turn?—yes, may the demons of every vile disease prey on his liver!"

Not knowing what to reply, Gates said nothing. But hope, dead only a minute before, had revived within him.

"As if he had not already injured me enough," went on the invisible, "he ordered me to keep away from the great festival of Dupepu, whereat all my brothers make merry. Forbidden me to

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enjoy the delectable, sacred fumes of Kishkash! For that he shall suffer!"

Yellow-Claws' tones, rasping and angry, indicated that the feud between the giants was far deeper than Gates has suspected. "And when I saw you creeping toward the Amvol-Amvol, O nignig, I knew that you would be the tool of my vengeance!"

"Me?" groaned the victim. Had he escaped the frying pan only to be plunged into the fire?

"Have no fear, earthling! My purpose matches your own. To be sure, there are perils—appalling perils! Not to master them is to die a horrible death. But to prevail is to escape from the Peerless Red One—and to repay him in full measure for his crimes against us both. Are you ready to take the risk, O earthling?"

"I am ready!"

"By the stars! That is more than I would have expected of one of your species! Then let us begin! We have but a little time before my brothers recover from the Kishkash."

Gates could not see the creature's yellow claws as they entered the pouch and drew out a pale blue powder. But he felt something soft, cool and tingling being sprinkled over his hands, his face, up his sleeves, and down his neck. And he had one of the strangest sensations of his life; for his body, even as he gazed at it, faded into a haze, and vanished. He could look through himself! could see the meshwork of shimmering cables as if there were nothing between!

"Come!" whispered his projector. "There is no time to lose!" And then angrily, beneath his breath, "Zugavl! Zugavl! Zug!"

Upheld and guided by Yellow-Claws—since his arms and legs, now that he could not see them, seemed oddly unreliable—Gates started once more down the web, above the spot where the intoxicated monsters, like huge overturned beetles, lay on their backs with furiously wriggling tentacles, legs and tails.

CHAPTER IX

Through the Barred Door

IF only she could get word to some one outside! If only some one could learn of her plight, she might be saved—might save the world! Such was the thought that kept pounding at Eleanor's brain as she sat stooped in her prison room, her head buried in her hands, while through the closed door came the buzzing and droning of motors.

Then by degrees an idea thrust itself upon her. As she moped alone in her dismal monotony, she had heard every evening the shuffling of some one ascending the steps just beyond the barred apartment door. The sound always came at the same time—at five minutes before six—and she could recognize the peculiar dreary noise as it approached. Might not the passer-by, whoever he was, become her deliverer? At first she thought of calling out to him; but realized that, even if he took heed, this would merely be to warn Dunbar, who would find ways to balk her plan.

No! she must communicate without being heard. But how? As if anticipating this very possibility, Dunbar had denied her all writing materials. She considered, indeed, the ancient device of a message written in her own blood, which she might scrawl on a fly-leaf torn from a book; but she feared that some chance blood-stain would furnish her captor with a fatal clue.

The thought of the books, however, gave her another idea. Leaping up with sudden alacrity, she went to the case Dunbar had mentioned, and eagerly selected a volume.

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Passing through the room half an hour later, her oppressor paused with a grim smile to see her bent above "The Greycourt Murder Mystery."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, as he leaned over her shoulder for a glance at the title. "Didn't know you went in for that sort of stuff. Good idea, though. Takes your mind off your troubles. Literature of escape, they call it."

He did not notice the ironic glint in her eyes, nor the faint quivering of her voice as she replied,

"Yes, that's it—literature of escape."

Had his mind not been preoccupied, he would have seen how her hands fluttered, and how tremulously she averted his gaze.

"Oh, by the way, might just as well tell you," he confided. "I've been making fine progress. In another five days, if all goes well, I'll be able to set you free."

"Free?" she gasped, unbelievingly.

"Yes, I'll be done with my job by then—have all the compressed air tanks ready, in just another five days."

She started up as if she had been struck, allowing the book to slip to the floor unnoticed.

"Five days?" she repeated, blankly, realizing how little time remained for her to work in. "Five days!"

"God! but I'm getting fed up, slaving in this damnable heat!" he muttered; and then, passing out of the room, threw out at her, with a burst of sardonic laughter,

"Now, my girl, better get back to your—your literature of escape!"

Stunned, she reached for the book. Yet it was with fresh alertness, with a swift new eagerness, that she began racing through the pages. Only a few minutes later, she came to a passage that made her sit up with a start. Then hastily she reached for the little blue handbag she had carried at the time of her capture by Dunbar; and drew out a pair of nail scissors. Her eyes had a furtive look as she stared toward the doorway where Dunbar had disappeared; but her fingers worked swiftly and nimbly as they clipped away at the printed page.

SEVERAL hours later, Emanuel Knapp, a civil service employee, was on his way home to his top-floor apartment. As usual, he puffed and wheezed as he climbed the weary five flights in the old-fashioned "walk-up" building; and, as usual for many weeks past, he sweated in the deadly heat. Arriving at the fourth floor, he paused to regain his breath; and, as he did so, he became conscious of a low rustling, and saw a thin bit of paper being ejected beneath the door of Apartment "4 E."

"Well now, isn't that funny," he thought; and, though not naturally a curious man, reached automatically for the paper.

As he opened it, he saw to his surprise that it was part of the title page of a book, and his eyes fell upon the conspicuous printed word, MURDER.

"What the heck! Am I going crazy with the heat?" he mumbled to himself; and noticing several smaller specks of paper fluttering loose from the larger one, he reached down for them also.

"For heaven's sake, rescue me!" he read on the first of the slips, which was printed in large book type; while another slip bore, in the same type, an even more startling notation, "I'm caught in the toils of the slimiest devil God ever put on earth!"

Now Emanuel Knapp was not a man naturally quick of apprehension. Hence he was not certain that anything was really seriously amiss. "Most likely there's some crazy loon inside—or else it's just a practical joke," he reflected, as he scowled at the door of 4 E.

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Having thus solved the mystery, he wiped his streaming red brow, and bleakly started up the final flights of stairs.

But, as he did so, he spied a third printed slip at the base of the steps. And wearily he reached down for it.

"Lord help us, sir, don't hesitate a minute!" he read. "Not one minute, or it will be too late!"

"By gum," he meditated, "wonder if there mightn't be something in it after all. Maybe I ought to notify the police. No harm, anyway, in letting 'em know."

But the thought of retreating down those four long flights of stairs was far from inviting. However, his interest being aroused, he pressed one ear against the door of 4 E. And, from within, he heard a low droning sound.

"By glory," he concluded, starting down the stairs, "maybe it's a counterfeiting gang!"

Fifteen minutes later, two officers of the law had marched in Knapp's company to the door of 4 E. And after prolonged rapping and violent bell-ringing, the door had opened, to reveal a man in a chemist's stained white robe, who greeted them blandly, and professed great surprise at their call.

"Looks like you've got the wrong apartment, Officers," he protested, suavely, when shown the clippings picked up by Knapp. "I've been busy all day with some experiments in the laboratory. There's no one else in the place."

"Well, damn it, the story did look phoney to me!" admitted Officer O'Madden, glaring reproachfully at Knapp. "What the hell! a regular cock-and-bull yarn! If the Chief hadn't ordered us to come—"

BUT Officer Frye was of a different turn of mind. "Perfectly sure you're the only person here, Mister?" he demanded of Dunbar.

"Hasn't been another soul around for weeks."

"Sure of that?"

"Absolutely!"

"Then what is that blue handbag doing over there on the settee?"

Dunbar could not quite control a startled gasp. His eyes flashed, and his lips twitched oddly. But he did not reply.

"Mind if I look at it?"

Dunbar, imposing himself in the way, started to protest. But the officer had already shoved himself into the room. In an instant he had snatched up the handbag and slipped open the clasp. And from within he had taken a small printed card, and read, "Miss Eleanor Firth."

"Firth? Eleanor Firth?" gasped O'Madden. "By crimps! ain't that the girl what disappeared the other day? Why, her folks set up a hell of a row—I was in the station when they popped in. Foul play, they called it."

A long weighted silence followed. Dunbar glanced furtively toward the door, as if looking for some easy way of escape. His eyes blazed with the fury of the trapped animal.

"Well, maybe it's just what you call a coincidence," drawled Officer Frye. "Anyway, guess we'd better take a look around."

Despite Dunbar's protestations, the officers proceeded to ransack the room—though without results. And while they were peering under tables, behind sofas and into closets, Knapp stood with his nose pressed suspiciously against a locked door.

"Say, Officer, there's a funny smell coming from over here," he reported.

"The whole place smells funny, if you ask me!" mumbled Frye. And then, turning to Dunbar, "Guess you'd better let us peep in there, Brother!"

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The chemist stood with his back firmly pressed against the door. "I'll be damned if you will! That's my private laboratory. I'm in the midst of an experiment, which will be ruined if I let any light in!"

"To hell with your experiment! Stand aside, Brother!"

But not until two pairs of strong arms had flung him away did Dunbar forsake the door. And not until two strong pairs of shoulders had pressed themselves against the partition did the lock show signs of yielding. It was just when it began to crack that Dunbar made his dash toward the front entrance—to be thwarted by the lucky chance that Knapp blocked his way, giving Frye time to lay hands upon him, while O'Madden finished the little business of breaking down the door.

As the barrier gave way, an unpleasant odor, a little like ether, penetrated to the men's nostrils.

"Jumping crickets!" cried O'Madden. "What in tarnation is this!"

Stretched full-length on the floor in the electric light, with pale bloodless face and inert, apparently unbreathing form, was a disshevelled young woman, her unbared left arm displaying a long bloody streak.

IN THE first amazed instant of the discovery, Officer Frye almost lost his grip on Dunbar.

"The saints preserve us! Is she dead?" he gasped.

"Looks like it," concluded O'Madden. "First let's attend to this devil, then we'll investigate."

Out rattled a pair of handcuffs, which clapped themselves about Dunbar's wrists.

Bending down to the girl, Frye felt her forehead. "Why, she's still warm," he discovered. "Couldn't be dead very long."

"You blinking idiots!" raged the captive, struggling in O'Madden's bear-like grip. "What makes you think she's dead? Why, she'll recover soon enough. If you'll give me a chance, I'll bring her back right now. We were just performing a little experiment—"

"Experiment! Like hell!"

It was only then that Frye observed the hyperdermic needle on the floor a few feet from the unconscious girl.

"Guess you can tell them all about that down at the station house," he observed, caustically. "Meanwhile we'd better bring the lady down to the doc's office on the first floor. You just keep your grip on that thug, O'Madden!"

Six-foot giant that he was, Frye had gathered the girl into his arms as easily as if she had been a sofa pillow.

"By God, if you don't let me go," threatened Dunbar, his black eyes glittering like a crowd of devils dancing, "I swear you'll rue the day!"

Frye's answer was a hoarse burst of laughter.

But cutting through his laughter with the sharpness of an earthquake, there came a rattling and banging at the laboratory window. And while the two officers and Knapp stood as if transfixed, the window shade flew up and the window burst open, though there was nothing visible to account for the commotion. O'Madden afterwards asserted that a cold breeze blew by him, though the thermometer stood around 100; and Frye, whose courage no one had ever doubted, did not deny that the hair on his head prickled and a chill swept down his spine.

"If only it'd been something I could of seen, no matter what, I'd of stood up against it," he recited, as he told of the event between gulps of whisky. "What the devil! A man can only die once! But this thing that you couldn't see or put hands on—Christ, I'd rather fight a

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herd of stampeding elephants!"

The fact was, as both officers testified, that the very walls of the room shook, as if rocked by some mighty force. Dunbar's handcuffs, though O'Madden swore that he had clasped them on firmly, fell to the floor as though they had been mere bands of paper. An eerie whirring voice, proceeding as if from nowhere, gave warning, "Harm him not, earthlings, or beware the consequences!" And, at the same time, Dunbar was jerked out of the astonished officer's grip!

Yes, jerked away completely, like a toy torn from a child's hands! From the expression on his face, it was evident that he was as bewildered as any one as he went gliding toward the window and out—out into the open air, where he disappeared in the fog! While, even as he vanished, the window shade snapped down and the window slammed shut.

"By glory, the place is haunted!" mumbled O'Madden, crossing himself. And as the three men, with the unconscious girl, emerged from the outer door of 4 E, their faces streamed with a sweat that did not come from the heat alone; and they knew that there was no force on earth powerful enough to induce them to set foot across that threshold again.

CHAPTER X

A Plunge in the Dark

BENEATH the great translucent milky-white envelope of the Planetoid, Gates stood in an egg-shaped jelly-like car about thirty feet tall. He was still invisible, even to himself; and could not see the gigantic companion who shared with him his curious vehicle. But through the gelatinous walls he could view the vast cloud-covered expanse of the earth as it rolled by far beneath.

"Now we must wait, nignig," his unseen companion was saying, "until we whirl around on our orbit to your own part of the globe. Fortunately, it is but a minute planet, and the journey will take scarcely another hour. The instruments will tell us when we arrive. But by my tail! may my brothers not revive before then!"

"What will we do, when we get to earth?" inquired Gates.

"Do? hissed Yellow-Claws. "What do you expect? Why, get vengeance, as I have told you, earthling!"

"But how get vengeance?"

"You shall see! May the blue lightnings blast me, if you do not see! I shall discredit the leadership of the Peerless Red One! I shall frustrate his schemes! I shall invalidate him, as we say on Saturn! Then he will go back home in disgrace, like the scum of the abyss that he is! He will commit Guhl-Guhli—which is to say, he will sting himself to death, and I will come into my own! Then, nignig, I will return and conquer this world as it should be conquered!"

Gates groaned. He began to see that at heart Yellow-Claws was no better than Red-Hood; all he would give the earth would be a momentary reprieve.

Yet was not even a momentary reprieve better than nothing?

So at any rate, Gates asked himself a little later in a spasm of alarm. Not quite an hour had gone by; and Yellow-Claws was just preparing to cut the egg-shaped car adrift. But suddenly, through the jelly-like shell of the Planetoid, huge spidery shapes were seen in shadowy movement. And Yellow-Claws whirred with excitement, "Quick, earthling, quick! or they'll be upon us!"

There came a ripping sound, though no cutting instrument was visible; and

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the car began to plummet earthward.

But at the same time, through apertures in the walls of the Planetoid, a score of octopus-limbed creatures began to glide, their angry eyes glaring, like triangular rubies, their arms waving fantastically. Around the Planetoid and beneath it they darted, then, gradually becoming dimmer of outline, disappeared from sight.

But Gates was not to be deceived. He knew that they had but garbed themselves in invisibility. He knew that the vibrations given off by Yellow-Claws' body would guide them, although their foe could not be seen. And he was appallingly aware that the whole pack of them were in pursuit of his protector.

"By our planet's ten moons! they must not catch us!" rattled out Yellow-Claws. "If we are captured, we will suffer the penalty of deserters. We will be slain—yes, slain by the method of Multiple Agony, which torments every nerve of the body for many days before death brings relief."

DOWN, down, down they dashed. They rushed through the stratosphere, and the earth seemed to leap forward to meet them. But reaching the heavier layers of the atmosphere, they were checked by the resistance of the air—and were checked even more by the tangle of invisible Saturnian webs.

Almost at the same time, they were lost in a fog. Whether the earth were near or far they could not say; they bobbed around like a ship on a stormy sea. "Cursed be all the demons of outer space! Something's wrong with the direction gauge!" muttered Yellow-Claws.

Even as he spoke, there came a roar from somewhere near at hand. And a dull-red smoke-puff burst through the fog overhead.

"Fiery imps of Jupiter!" growled Yellow-Claws. "They've got the range!"

It was an extraordinary battle that followed. Both sides were invisible; both aimed frightening flashes in the other's direction. Grimly Gates reflected that earth-folk, watching the demonstration from below, would think an unusually severe thunder storm in progress. For, in truth, there were all the symptoms of a thunder storm. The sky rumbled with detonations as of gigantic artillery; red lightnings and blue and purple shot through the hazes in zigzag streaks; rain began to fall in howling torrents. How it was that they escaped destruction in that first moment of the encounter was more than Gates could explain; for he saw crimson bars and blue balls of fire playing along the outer surface of the jelly-like envelope.

Manifestly, the car was made of a strongly non-conducting substance; but, even so, he expected the whole fragile affair to collapse instantly.

But the speed of their descent, it soon appeared, was greater than they had imagined; in less than five minutes, they grew conscious of vague outlines just beneath. At almost the same moment, there came a violent threshing and bumping, and Gates, stunned and bruised, was aware of vague projections, which he recognized as the limbs of trees.

At the same time, he was startled by a loud popping, as of a suddenly deflated balloon.

"By the Eleventh Asteroid!" rasped Yellow-Claws. "We're being torn to shreds!"

Surely enough, the branches of the tree had slashed through the gelatinous envelope, which was hanging from the foliage in wispy, thinly palpitating

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bands and tatters. Their car—or, rather, all that was left of it—had lodged in the upper limbs of a huge oak, forty feet above ground!

Not that this distance meant anything, so far as Yellow-Claws was concerned. But his protective envelope had been destroyed; and though a red spout of smoke vomited from between his gray-green lips and lunged toward his foe in forked lightnings, he knew that the battle was lost.

"Stay where you are, earthling!" he muttered. "They must not find you! By my fifth arm! They will pay dearly for my life!"

BEFORE these words had died in his ears, Gates knew that Yellow-Claws had sprung down from the tree. The lightnings had become a little more remote, though hardly less terrible. Then a scream shrilled from the distance, and Gates rejoiced to know that one of the enemy had been struck. But almost immediately, closer at hand, there rose an unearthly shriek, followed by a groan as of some being in utmost anguish.

"Thur-glut-nu! Thur-glut-nu!" came terribly, in the Saturnian tongue. And then less fiercely, to Gates,

"May all the devils of the space-ways curse them! They've hit me! Hit me, earthling, in the middle nerve center!" —by which he referred to a spot beneath the left shoulder, which, Gates had learned, was a Saturnian's one really vunerable point.

Yellow-Claws' next words were rasping and horrible beyond description.

"Flee, nignig, flee! I invoke on them the curses of a thousand dead generations! the venom of all black planets! I—I—by my father's claws, I shall never see Saturn again!"

The cry trailed off into a confusion of words in the suffer's native tongue. There came another moan; then a series of terrifying snorts, snarls and bellowings, as of a wolf-pack closing in on its prey. And red and green lightnings flashed, and blue fireballs played among the treetops . . . while a pandemonium of thunder drowned out that fiendish chorus.*

Quivering, Gates clung to his perch high in the oak-tree. At any moment, he expected to be snatched up by an invisible arm. Yet time went by, the lightnings and thunders faded out, and at last he began to breathe more easily. He heard the threshing as of mighty forms moving past him. They brushed by the tree; they whisked through the woods to right and to left. But thanks to his invisibility; thanks also to the fact that, unlike Yellow-Claws, he set up no etheric vibration that his enemies could detect, he remained unmolested.

It seemed a long while before at last all became quiet. Then, as the immediate danger passed, the rescued man began to take stock of his position.

"By god," he reflected, with a wry grimace, "I'd better not start crowing just yet!" For had he escaped only in order to face a lingering, more cruel doom? Lost in some unknown corner of the woods, perhaps many miles from home; invisible, and without food, money, or other means of making his way, he was, to say the least, in a desperate pass. Would he be able, despite all handicaps, to make his way to civilization before Dunbar could carry out his Mephistophelean plots?

His teeth bit into his lower lip with a grimness of determination as, in the misty twilight, he felt his way down from the tree and began searching for an outlet from the wilderness.

* On Earth, fireballs can travel along a wire fence, but are grounded instantly they come to a wooden post, provided they are in direct contact. However, these unearthly fireballs seem to have a negative quality.—Ed.

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CHAPTER XI

The Electronic Space Ray

THE story of Officers Frye and O'Madden was greeted at the station with incredulous smiles. Evidently these two doughty old members of the force had been drinking too heavily; or else, like so many thousands, had gone crazy with the heat. Nevertheless, thanks to their allegations, two of their brother officers were dispatched to investigate Philip Dunbar's apartment.

An hour later, they returned. Their uniforms were rumpled; their hair lay loose and dishevelled across their sweaty red brows; their eyes popped from their heads, and their hands shook and twitched with nervous palpitations. Their experience was thus reported to Captain Donnelley by Officer Halloran:

"We went up to that hell's nest, and worse luck to us! Got in without any trouble, didn't we, Jensen? Somebody pulled the door open, and said in the doggonest funniest voice you ever heard, 'Come in, earthlings, we want some sport!' We knew then there was bats in somebody's belfry, but went in anyway, and would you b'lieve it, there wasn't nobody near the door. We walked further inside, and saw a guy working over a lot of tubes and bottles; he said his name was Dunbar all right, and yelled at us, 'I warn you, get out, before it is too late!' . . . 'We've got a warrant for your arrest,' says I, 'so you'd better come nice and quiet.' At that he just laughed, didn't he, Jensen?"

"You'd of thought it was something funny, being arrested, by jiminy!" affirmed Officer Jensen.

"Well, nobody wouldn't ever believe it, but before I could get to the guy, the handcuffs was knocked right outer my hands," went on Halloran. "Not by that fellow Dunbar, neither, curse him! He was over on the other side of the room. Somebody hit me right through the air, with something I couldn't see. May I be boiled in tar if I lie!"

"You sure oughter be boiled in tar, if you expect me to believe that tommy-rot!" growled the Captain.

"Well, b'lieve it or not, that ain't nothing to what happened to me," Jensen took up the story. "I felt something grabbing me by the hair. Yes, so help me God! I reached up my hand, and felt something cold and hard, like a lobster's claw. But you still couldn't see a damned thing!"

"Ought of heard what a yell Jensen let out," Halloran continued. "Sure was fit to wake the dead!"

"Oh, gwan!" countered Jensen. "'Twasn't nothing to the way you hollered when you was pitched plumb across the room!"

"Well, who wouldn't holler if they was batted hard against the wall by some invisible devil? I ain't boasting when I say I'm a tough nut to crack, but when that thing, whatever it was, began tweaking my ears and nose and saying, 'This is the way we'll twist your necks, earthlings, if the likes of you ever come back here'—well then, what in thunder do you think I'd do? Stay to get my neck twisted?"

The Captain meanwhile was smiling cynically.

"You boys sure must think I like fish stories!" he remarked.

It may not be that any one took Jensen and Halloran quite seriously. Yet was it not hard to believe that four trusty old members of the force had all gone crazy? The fact is, in any case, that when the Captain considered sending two more men to the mysterious apartment, he could find no one who did not threaten to resign from the force sooner than accept the assignment.

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ELEANOR meanwhile, as Dunbar had predicted, had regained consciousness. Yet she could give only a confused account of what had happened. "When the bell began ringing so furiously," she testified, "I thought I heard Dunbar stealing behind me, but paid no attention till suddenly I felt a sharp jab in one arm. By then it was too late even to cry out. Everything went black around me before I'd even had time to realize he'd stabbed me again with the hyperdermic."

Thanks to her entreaties and the testimony of the officers, she was granted a bodyguard of two detectives; for, as she asserted, "The minute I walk out by myself, that fiend will re-capture me. And I have work to do—very important work, if the world is to be saved!"

Every one smiled in half-veiled amusement. Yet no one could deny the deadly seriousness of the girls' manner.

No one could deny, either, that she was in danger from some mysterious source. On the day after her release, two men in a taxicab swerved suddenly around a street corner, and came within an inch of snatching her from under the noses of the detectives. The would-be abductors, though unsuccessful, made good their escape; and, later that same day, a still more ominous event occurred.

Eleanor was walking in a fog not far from one of the city's main intersections, when suddenly she felt something clutching her. She cried out in her terror; and the detectives, though seeing nothing, fired into the mist. Evidently it was a mere lucky shot that struck the unseen aggressor under the left shoulder, at his "middle nerve center," his most vulnerable spot. At any rate, an unearthly howl came from the invisible —and, more significant yet, a spout of something thick, sticky and golden-orange jutted to the pavement as if from nowhere. And the girl felt the claws of the invisible relaxing.

"Another damned attack of nerves," Police Captain Donnelley called it, when the incident was reported. Yet, being unable to account for the golden-yellow liquid, he consented to double the girl's bodyguard.

Knowing that the time was exceedingly short—in fact, to take Dunbar's word for it, but four days of grace remained—she worked with desperation. Her first idea was to obtain possession of Gates' infra-red eye, which might show the authorities the cobweb meshes that entangled the planet, and so perhaps rouse them to eleventh hour action. But how obtain this invaluable device? Neither a search of the laboratory, nor a ransacking of Gates' home, revealed any trace of the instrument. Eleanor remembered in despair how, on that memorable evening on the roof, the inventor dropped the device just as the Saturnians swooped down; and she concluded that it had either been broken, lost, or snatched up by the invaders.

THEREFORE she turned to her one other hope. For almost a year, during spare hours in the laboratory, she had been working on what she called the Electronic Space Ray—a beam designed to pierce and dissolve the upper cloud formations. This ray, a modification of the X-ray, engendered by an application of several hundred thousand volts of electricity, had the power of cutting like a knife through any mist, causing the vapors to disperse as though blown aside by a gale. Its range, apparently, was enormous; Eleanor believed it capable of bridging the gulf from the earth to the moon, and held that it would be highly effective at several hundred miles.

Therefore the question arose: if the rays could dissipate a cloud, could they

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not penetrate the gelatinous envelopes of the Crystal Planetoids? Was it not conceivable that they could rip the Planetoids apart, as a balloon may be ripped by a bullet? She did not know, but the chance, however fantastic it seemed, was not to be ignored.

Surrounded by her four guards, she hastened to the laboratory of the Merlin Research Institute; and, requiring solitude for efficient work, busied herself from dawn to dusk and even through the early hours of daylight to perfect her invention. Formerly she had expected to be able to finish the contrivance at her leisure. But now with what feverish haste she labored, scarcely taking time to eat, to sleep, to think except of one thing only!

At first the fear haunted her that the Saturnians would break in, and steal her away despite her bodyguard. But was it that the one lucky shot, which had spilled the golden-orange blood of her attacker, had deterred the invaders? More probably, they did not think her worth bothering about—what could she, one poor feeble woman, do to avert the doom that had been so well plotted, and that was so soon to descend?

The heat, as she worked, had risen to furnace intenstiy. Temperatures below a hundred were now rarely found near sea level in the so-called temperate regions; all breezes, except those engendered by electric fans, were memories of the dear departed days; while so many areas were parched and browned, so many people were perishing on all sides, that bureaux of statistics no longer kept records. That the long-awaited Day of Judgment was at hand; that the destruction of the earth and all its inhabitants was a matter but of weeks or at most of months, was now the theme of preachers and laymen alike; millions, ceasing to hope, passed their days amid a long mumbling of lamentations and prayers.

MEANWHILE few knew or cared about the young woman who, with eyes red and strained, with fingers deft yet nervously hurried, with skin and apron mottled with chemicals, yet with a spirit that refused to give up, labored amid the motors and ray-spouting tubes, the flasks and crucibles of the steamy hot laboratory. Nearly five days had gone by before she had put her machine into working order—five days which, in view of the time lost under the spell of the hyperdermic drug, should bring her beyond the deadline set by Dunbar. Already, perhaps, he had turned over the containers of compressed air to the Saturnians! Already they were making their last deadly assault! Already it was too late—too late to save the earth!

Nevertheless, if but one chance in ten thousand remained, that chance must not be tossed aside.

Her machine, when ready, was a montrous-looking affair, somewhat resembling a siege-gun in appearance. The fifteen-foot steel snout, shooting upward like a spire from the central mass of lenses, prisms and radio-like tubes, was attached by wires to several huge dynamos. A telescope, fastened to the side of the main tube, connected with the range-finder; while the whole could be moved hither and thither on wheels, a little like a great gun on its carriage.

Three skilled mechanics, who had helped to construct the apparatus on Eleanor's instructions, shook their heads doubtfully over the completed instrument. "The lady must be crazy," they muttered in private, "if she thinks such a rigamagig can save the world!"

The skeptics were, it is true, just a little impressed by the first demonstration. The machine was wheeled into a

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courtyard adjoining the Research Institute; and its mouth was pointed upward into the mists that precluded visibility above a hundred feet. At a signal, the power was turned on; there came a low whirring, accompanied by blue flashes; and almost instantly, as if some unseen fist had thrust its way through them, the vapors disappeared from a circle of sky about ten degrees across, and the azure of heaven appeared for the first time in many days.

Equally impressive was the next experiment. A number of open jars of gelatin were placed against the walls of the building, and the machine was pointed toward them. For half a dozen seconds they were bombarded by the rays; then, upon examination, the gelatin was found to have vanished—to have dissolved despite the intervening glass of the jars, which themselves had seemingly been unaffected!

A faint glow of hope came to the girl's mind as she witnessed these results. Could it be that, after all, not everything was lost? A machine that could work such miracles might also perform wonders against the Planetoids!

But even as this thought flashed over her, there came another realization—a numb, dull realization that struck her like a hand of lead. On one of the Planetoids, hundreds if not thousands of humans were held—at least, so she judged from the reports of the many that disappeared mysteriously after setting out to see Gates dangled from the web of the invaders. Worst of all! The man she loved was a prisoner! If she destroyed the Planetoids, she would destroy Ronald! And after that, though the world lived on, what meaning would life have for her?

But only for a moment did she hesitate. They had reached a point where the fate of individuals did not matter. The sacrifice of all the captives, lamentable as it would be—the sacrifice of her lover—the sacrifice of herself—what did all this count beside the future of the human race?

Gritting her teeth and clenching her fists, she turned back to the Electronic Space Ray. Her eyes were desolate but her manner was determined as she picked up the range finder and revolved the telescope through a newly cleared circle of blue sky.

CHAPTER XII

Prelude to Battle

THERE are some grave disadvantages in being invisible. So, at least, Gates concluded as he went groping through the woods in the effort to find his bearings. It is disconcerting, to say the least, to ask a passer-by the way, and to be greeted with a shriek, and watch the man turn and dash away frantically, as from a ghost. It is aggravating to reach an automobile road and find every car trying to drive full-tilt through one. Gates felt like a man returning from the dead as he picked his way out of the woods, and, reaching a village, began to make a few civil inquiries. . . . Inevitably, he found, his hearers would flee the vicinity of his voice; and the harder he tried to call them back the faster they would run.

He passed the night in an open field under a haystack—which, considering the heat, was not at all a hardship. In the morning, driven by hunger, he strolled into a farmhouse; and while the family stampeded like sheep from the sound of his footsteps, he calmly helped himself to some ham and biscuits from the kitchen table. Having thus satisfied his needs, he wandered away along a railroad track, and after about an hour's walk reached a junction, where a

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sign on the station showed him that he was two hundred miles from home. "God! How'm I ever going to make the distance?" he wondered, reflecting that he had not a penny in his pockets.

Twenty minutes later, while he still stood there baffled, a train puffed into the station—one of the few still running in those disorganized days. Several people stepped aboard; and, without hesitation, he joined them, trusting to his invisibility to save him from the demands of the ticket-taker.

As there was no unoccupied seat, he stood in the vestibule, which caused not a little confusion, as people kept brushing against him as they went by, greatly to their consternation. Long before they had reached their destination, in fact, half the passengers were ready to swear that the train was haunted. This view was furthered by Buck Johnson, one of the colored waiters in the dining car, who testified that while his back was turned the better part of the contents of a tray disappeared—and that he turned about just in time to see a sausage go floating down the passageway, although nobody was in sight!

It was fortunate, Gates thought, that the train was air-conditioned; the cool, fresh atmosphere made it easier for him to think. And, certainly, he needed to think as never before. What would he do upon getting back home? Obviously, go as soon as possible to Dunbar's apartment, to check that traitor's vile designs, if there were still time! And to rescue Eleanor from his clutches! But was it not already too late? Gates gravely feared so. Besides, how prevail against Dunbar, protected as he was by the overweening power of the Saturnians?

"Well, at least," Gates reflected, "I can't be seen—that's one strategic advantage." But it would take more than his invisibility to win the battle. He must have weapons—weapons of unrivalled power. And where could such be found?

AT this thought he remembered a certain invention he had toyed with months before. This was a knife which he called the Electric Blade: a folding strip of metal, small and compact, and short enough to be carried in a man's hip pocket, yet capable of being extended to the length of one's forearm, when it would cut with the sharpness of a sword. To it was attached a minute but powerful storage battery which Gates had perfected: a battery that made it possible for the blade to slash back and forth with such swiftness that the eye could hardly follow its motions. The inventor had believed that the weapon might prove valuable for close combat work in warfare; but had lost interest in it temporarily while working on that still more important device, the Infra-Red Eye.

It was, however, with the greatest of enthusiasm that he thought now of the Electric Blade. Might this not be just what he needed in the conflict with Dunbar? Knowing something of the prowess of the Saturnians, he was far from sure; nevertheless, he swore a bitter oath, "I'll have a try at it, even if they hack me to mincemeat!"—which, he realized, they were only too likely to do.

The Electric Blade, he recalled, had been left in his locker at the Merlin Research Institute. Accordingly, it was to this spot that he must hasten immediately upon returning to the city.

It was night by the time he had reached the building; and the front door was locked. But seeing a light inside, he rapped. As no answer came, he rapped again, this time more loudly; and then rapped once more, still more loudly. It was only after the fourth or

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fifth summons that he heard shuffling footsteps warily approaching. "What the devil!" he muttered to himself. "Do they think I want to steal the building?"

"Who's there?" a voice from within demanded, huskily.

"It's I! Ronald Gates! An employee of the Institute!"

There was a momentary hesitation. He heard two men conferring in whispers; then the door opened a few inches, and he stared into the muzzle of a revolver, behind which glowered the grim, determined face of a uniformed man.

"Don't be scared, Officer," he began, slightly amused. "I can establish my identity—"

Instantly there rang out a yell from the uniformed man. Savagely the door banged to a close. "By God! It's one of them devils from Saturn!"

Almost simultaneously, he heard another voice taking up the cry. "Run, Miss, run! Quick! Ain't no time to waste! One of them fiends is after you again!"

From within, he heard a woman's scream. "Out this way! This way!" And all other sounds were lost amid the scurrying of feet.

But had those tones not had a familiar ring? Could it be—or was his heated imagination only playing tricks?

HE lost no time, however, in useless questionings. Realizing that the fugitives must leave by the rear exit, on another street, he raced around the raced around the block, in such haste that he bowled over two pedestrians, who were never to know what had hit them. As he approached the rear door, he saw five figures hurriedly emerge, among them a young woman, the sight of whom caused his heart to pound furiously.

"Eleanor!" he shouted. "Eleanor!"

The girl glanced toward him, and shrieked. Even if she recognized his voice, she thought that it was merely one of the Saturnians imitating him.

"Eleanor! Eleanor!" he repeated. "It's I, Ronald! It's I!"

But it was doubtful if she even heard. Preceding the four policemen—pushed and shoved by them, for he had never seen men in more frantic haste—she was lost to view inside a black sedan. A moment later, the car had spurted from sight around the corner.

Greatly shaken, Gates returned to the Institute. It was much—very much—to know that Eleanor was alive, and apparently not in Dunbar's hands. But to have her flee him as though he were a plague-bearer; to be mistaken by her for one of the Saturnians—that was a new and totally unexpected experience. Now, as never before, he began to curse his invisibility.

But there was work to be done—work from which he must not be deterred even by the thought of Eleanor. And at this point, as if by way of compensation, his invisibility served him to excellent purpose. How, considering that the doors were all locked, could he get into the Institute? Contemplatively he strolled around the building, and saw that the one possible entry was by means of an open window facing the fire escape on the third floor. To hoist himself up to the fire escape was, to be sure, no great task for one of his agility; but as it gave upon a main street, where many people were passing, it would have been impossible for any ordinary man to accomplish the feat without detection. As it was, however, he managed the entry with ease.

Once within, he felt his way down to the locker room, where he switched on the lights, and turned to his own locker—the combination of which, fortunately, had not been altered. A moment

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later, the door rattled open. He saw that the interior had been disturbed, as though somebody had entered during his absence and fumbled among the contents; but his pulses leapt with excitement when, safely hidden in a corner, he located a steel-sheathed apparatus of about the size of a large pistol.

"Thank heaven!" he muttered. "This little blade may hold the world's destiny!"

He placed the instrument carefully beneath his garments, so that it too became invisible; closed the locker; and started away, with the knowledge that he hastened to a battle that could end only in victory or death.

CHAPTER XIII

The Electric Blade Swings

STRIPPED to the waist, Philip Dunbar worked in the electric glare of the oven-hot laboratory. The throbbing of motors made a dull undertone in his ears as he examined the register connecting with the steel cylinders of compressed air. His dark face had become long and haggard; his eyes glittered with a wild, almost demoniacal light. But a grunt of satisfaction came from between those two thin cynic lips of his as he muttered,

"Thank the Lord! At last it's done!"

"Thank not the Lord, earthling! Thank us!" a whirring voice sounded from just outside the window. "For many days we have followed your labors. For many days we have assisted. Nevertheless, you are a day behind schedule. A whole day, earthling!"

"I have done my best!" sighed Dunbar. "Could I help it if I was sick with the heat for two days, and could hardly work?"

"We will forgive you this once, nignig, although on our planet we are not such weaklings as to get sick. After all, you have served us not badly. Tomorrow, with the compressed air to improve our efficiency, we will be lords of this world!"

"Tomorrow we will be lords of this world!" another voice, from an invisible source, weirdly repeated.

"Earthling, we have one more command," buzzed the first voice. "These casks of compressed air are hard for us to reach through your narrow window. See that they are placed outside on the ground. Have them put there early tomorrow, that we may gather them up with ease."

"I shall do so!" acceded Dunbar. And hastily he added, "Then you will not—will not forget your promise?"

"Never fear!" a voice of reassurance droned. "When all the rest of your race sleeps in the long Forever, you will be glad to be alive—you, the last man!"

"I will be glad to be alive," acknowledged Dunbar. But his voice had a tone of sadness; his long, lean, dark countenance drooped.

"One thing more! The female of my race—the girl I call Eleanor—have you not saved her as a reward for my services? Through the wiles of wicked connivers, she has escaped. Once more I ask you, can you not seize her and bring her back?"

"Once more I tell you, earthling, the Peerless Red One has changed his mind about the female of your species. In truth, we were not sorry when she got away; and made but little effort to recapture her, for she drew your mind from your work. The Peerless Red One has decided, if the female of the species is crafty enough to get away, might she not be crafty enough to cause us much trouble? No, earthling! Let her perish with the rest of her crawling species!"

Dunbar groaned, and sank disconso-

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lately to the laboratory floor. Had he not learned that nothing was more futile than to argue with a Saturnian?

THE dreary gray of dawn was visible through the stagnant cloud-banks by the time Gates had started toward Dunbar's apartment.

One thing, in particular, had delayed him. Having secured the Electric Blade, he decided that he must also obtain the Infra-Red Eye as a precaution in case of conflict with the Saturnians. One of the instruments, he recalled to his regret, had been lost during that first encounter with the invaders from space. But there was another, which he had left for safekeeping in the home of his old friend Bill Denny. Here, however, was indeed a predicament! How could he got to Denny and ask for his property, now that he was invisible? After much thought, he concluded that only one course was open to him; hence, taking a flashilght from his locker at the Institute, he hurried to Bill's home, climbed in through a window, and began to ransack his friend's spare room, where he knew the Infra-Red Eye was kept.

It was this that gave rise to the panic in the Denny household; to Martha Denny's screams when she awakened long after midnight and saw a light proceeding as if on its own volition down the empty hallway. Bill Denny, who went to investigate, said that he heard the sound of racing footsteps, and caught a gleam, which he attributed to a burglar's flashlight; and this theory was borne out the following morning by the disordered state of the spare room. But what nobody could understand was that a bill-packed wallet, which stood in plain sight, had been untouched; while the only thing taken was the peculiar-looking contraption entrusted to Bill weeks ago by his missing friend, poor old Ronny Gates.

Meantime, with the Infra-Red Eye shielded from sight beneath his garments, Gates was approaching Dunbar's apartment house. As he drew near in the early dawn, he paused in an adjoining court; and a thrill of satisfaction shot through him to know that, after all, he was not too late. No! but he was barely in time! For two workmen, heaving and panting, were throwing a thick steel cylinder on top of a great heap.

Beside them stood Dunbar, looking hot and unhappy as he directed their movements with nervous haste. "Now you fellows, just one more!" he was ordering, with a growl. "Go up and get it, and I'll pay you off! Go on, quick! God! what are you such snails about?"

As the men slouched away, Gates let out an unconscious grunt; at which Dunbar turned toward him sharply, terror in his piercing black little eyes. "Good heavens!" he muttered to himself, as he hastily lit a cigarette. "I'm getting so I see things everywhere!"

A FEW minutes later, the last of the cylinders had been deposited on the heap; the workmen had been paid, and had gone shuffling off; and Dunbar, leaning against the pile, was awaiting the arrival of the Saturnians. Nor had he long to wait. The laborers had hardly passed out of sight around the corner, when one of the cylinders began to move as of its own will, and, with gradually accelerating velocity, shot into the air and out of sight.

Now if ever, Gates realized, was the time to act! With trembling speed, he drew the Infra-Red Eye from under his coat, so as to reveal the Saturnians who, he felt sure, were all about him. For a moment alarm possessed him; for the Eye, being visible, would betray him to the foe! But no! evidently some of the

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Amvol-Amvol had been rubbed upon it in its contact with his clothes; it too was invisible!

Hastily he adjusted it, by means of tight bands running around his head; yet not so hastily as to make unnecessary noise. How fortunate, he thought, that the Saturnians' ears were less acute than some of their other senses! Yet what he saw, after he had turned the proper screws and levers, was nothing to reassure him. Not one Saturnian, nor even two, as he had expected! Nor even five or six! At least twelve of the great creatures, with their dangling octopus limbs, their long stinging tails, their red triangular eyes—at least twelve of them, all seeming of a watery pallor through the Infra-Red Eye! And among them, leading them as he strutted savagely back and forth among the compressed air containers, was the overtowering form of Red-Hood!

Pressed into a basement doorway for protection, Gates planned his action. His mind worked with spring-like rapidity; he knew that he had not a second to waste. Two advantages were his: the Electric Blade, and his ability to take his adversaries by surprise. But how slight these assets seemed by comparison with the number and prowess of his foes!

Yet not for an instant did he flinch. If he must die, then he must die! Out from beneath his coat came the Electric Blade, its sheath fortunately invisible; but after he had set the motors into operation, the whirring sound betrayed him.

"What's that?" came suspiciously from one of the Saturnians, in his native tongues, as the monster started toward the source of the sound.

Instantly Gates released the blade to its full length. But, as he did so, he received another shock. The metal, in its folded position, had evidently missed contact with the Amvol-Amvol! It could be seen just like any ordinary steel!

"Ah! What devil have we here?" dinned from the Saturnian, in a mighty roar. And he lunged in Gates' direction.

AS he did so, the blade began to swing with such speed that it made but a gray blur. Too swift for the Saturnians to follow its movements, the steel slashed at the assailant, whom Gates could clearly see through the Infra-Red Eye. The first blows made but minor dents in the creature's tough armor; but after a second or two Gates swung the weapon upward toward the enemy's left shoulder.

Horrible to hear was the monster's howl as the Middle Nerve Center was penetrated and fountains of golden-orange overflowed the pavement. Terrible beyond words was his death-yell as he sagged and sank, and, with all his limbs threshing violently, clutched blindly for his foe.

But Gates had leapt out of range. Vehemently he was darting hither and thither among the Saturnians, slashing in all directions with the furiously swinging blade. He could see the octopus limbs of half a score of the creatures writhing simultaneously toward him, interfering with one another in their conculsive movements. However, they aimed not at him but at the blade, and always they struck at the point where it had been just a fraction of a second before their blows descended. Thus, by a hair's breadth, Gates was able to elude them.

How long would he be able to keep up the unequal struggle? His strength was waning; his breath was coming hard and fast; its very sound would have betrayed him had it not been for the other noises of battle. Already he had

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wounded several adversaries, though not mortally; their golden-yellow blood flowed, but they still fought on. Time after time he felt himself brushed by their sweeping arms; felt their deathly cold claws against his skin. Once, by less than a finger's breadth, he escaped a lashing envenomed tail.

Even as he lodged this peril, Gates recognized the huge gray-green lips of Red-Hood. He saw the malevolent red light in the eyes of his chief antagonist; and, like a matador fleeing a bull, he ducked and ran sideways. Then, with ferocious suddenness, he turned and swung the flashing blade upward.

A fraction of a second too soon or too late, and he would have been lost. A few inches too high, or a few inches too low, and he might as well not have fought at all. But Red-Hood, stooping low as he charged head forward, had exposed the vulnerable left shoulder. And straight through the susceptible spot burst the cleaving, electrically driven blade.

RED-HOOD'S roar of rage and agony, as he sank amid hideous convulsions, was all but drowned by the dismayed bellowings of his companions. One and all, as though they had hit a blank wall, halted in shrieking consternation at the sight of their smitten leader. And Gates, springing forward, profited from that instant of demoralization, to strike another of the creatures through the Middle Nerve Center.

As he leapt back, barely in time to avert the drive of the swinging tail, he made an amazing observation. The creatures were all in flight! From their terrorized cries, he knew that they thought they were fighting not one man, but an invisible army!

But the last of the monsters, as he turned to flee, swung back briefly. Crouched in a cranny against a coal-bin, was a cowering form, its eyes wide with terror. "You, nignig—you, you are the root of all our trouble!" rasped the Saturnian. "You have betrayed us! You shall be punished!"

Out swung the terrible tail; its barbed point, with the speed of an arrow, plunged into Dunbar's heart. And as the victim, gasping, collapsed in his own blood, his assailant went swinging away up a great cobweb.

Meanwhile Gates, sinking in exhaustion to the pavement, stared at the stones smeared with great streaks of golden-yellow; stared at the still untouched containers of compressed air, and solemnly mumbled a prayer of thanksgiving.

CHAPTER XIV

Deliverance

GATES' first thought, after recovering his breath, was to finish his half-completed task. What if the Saturnian retreat were but temporary? What if the foe should rally, and return with redoubled fury? What if, after all, they should seize the containers of compressed air, and so accomplish their original purpose and conquer the planet?

"By glory! not if I can prevent!" Gates swore a secret oath, as he staggered toward the great steel cylinders. To carry off even one of the heavy affairs would, obviously, be impossible—but was there no other way? After a swift examination, he noticed a little faucet-like spout at the end of one of the vessels, and took it to be a valve to relieve excessive pressure.

"Just five minutes' leeway," he thought, "and there won't be a whiff of compressed air left in the whole shooting match!"

At the same time, he gave the spigot

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a swift turn in his fingers.

Instantly there came such a blast that he was stunned. A loud popping, as of an explosion, dinned in his ears. He reeled backward, knocked over as by a hurricane. For a second or two a great fury of escaping air blew by him.

Still a little dazed, he picked himself up a minute later, cursing his own stupidity. In his haste he had turned the vent on full force, so relieving far too much pressure—with results that might have been disastrous.

Worst of all! what if the commotion should summon the Saturnians back?

Even as this fear swept across him, he made a discovery which, for the moment, alarmed him even more. He could see himself again! His arms, his legs, and all of his body, were perfectly visible! The blast of air had been powerful enough to blow away all the Amvol-Amvol, the powder of invisibility!

Aware that he would be utterly at the Saturnians' mercy should they return, he worked quickly as possible to release the compressed air from the other containers. At any moment, he expected to be snatched up by a huge swooping claw, and borne away to his doom. But time went by, and the monsters did not re-appear. And at length the last of the compressed air cylinders was empty!

Then for the first time, as he started hastily away, a flash of joyous realization swept over him. What a relief to be visible again! Once more he could be received as a man!

EARLY in the morning, following the alarm from the supposed Saturnians, Eleanor insisted on resuming work at the Electronic Space Ray. Surrounded by a whole squad of policemen—since her four previous protectors had insisted that they were too few—she entered the courtyard adjoining the Research Institute, where her machine with its fifteen-foot cannon-like muzzle was pointed skyward. Now at last she was ready for the crucial work!

Reaching the courtyard, she adjusted the instrument; cleared an open circle of blue sky; and in so doing destroyed, she knew, an incalculable number of the invisible cobwebs that clogged the atmosphere. But she was out after bigger prey than cobwebs. By means of the telescope she located a tiny shining speck which she recognized as one of the Crystal Planetoids; and, with trembling hands, pointed her machine toward the section of the sky containing the Planetoid.

Then, for the barest fraction of a second, she hesitated. She knew it was but womanly weakness; she knew it was unworthy, inconsistent with her all-important scheme; yet the hot tears trickled down her cheeks, and something clutched at her throat. The next flick of her fingers might be the movement that destroyed scores of human beings, among them Ronny, her lover.

None the less, she held back only for an instant. Her fingers flashed against a lever; and a faint clicking came to her ears. With eyes glued to the telescope, she watched; and immediately, it seemed, she made out a puff of red fire where the Planetoid had been—a puff that swiftly gave way to long ruddy streamers, which almost as swiftly vanished.

Still struggling, she could not keep back her sobs. "Ronny would forgive me, if he knew!" she consoled herself. Nevertheless, several minutes had passed, before, with a great effort of will, she turned to the range finder, and prepared to look for another Planetoid.

Then it was, that all at once, there came a sound which she heard in mute, incredulous amazement. What was

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Don Hargreaves didn't anticipate what was in store for him deep inside Mars when he ran away from boredom—and blundered into the stronghold of the Pirates of Venus!

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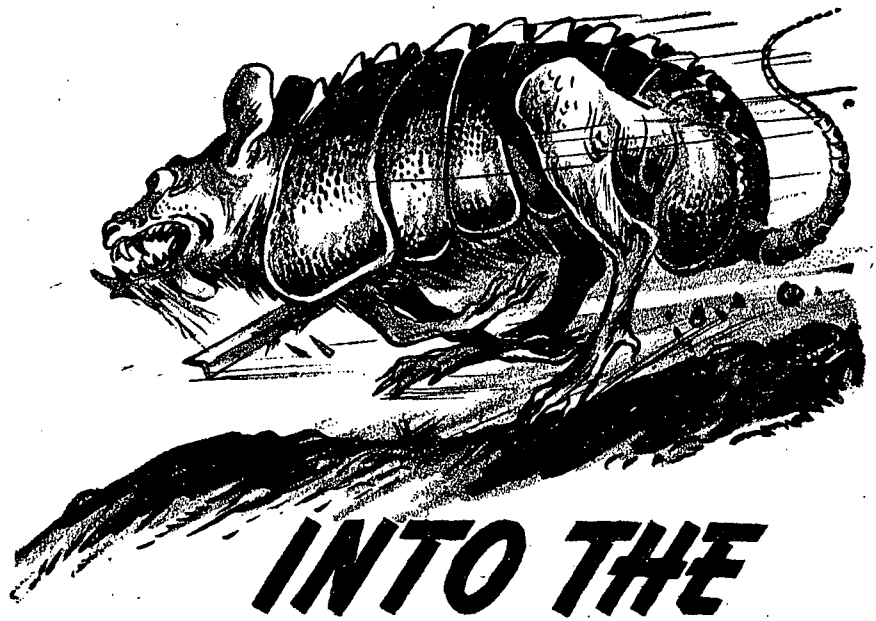

INTO THE CAVES OF MARS

By FESTUS PRAGNELL

I THINK I'm lucky, do you Festus? Being married to Princess Wimpolo, daughter of King Usulor, Emperor and Overlord of the underground world of Mars. Yes, I know it sounds good to you. You ought to try it, Festus, and see how you like having a wife who is ten feet tall and weighs half a ton. She can pick me up in one hand.

If I didn't assert myself sometimes, I'd have no more say in matters than a little pet dog. Sometimes I have to put my foot down. I did over the question of the onions for instance.

It was her habit, when she was dressing, to have beside her an enormous jar of pickled onions, and from time to time she would take one out and pop it in her mouth. It made her breath like a gale in an onion farm.

"Look here, Wimp," I said, "you've got to stop it."

"What's biting you now?" she asked.

"Eating so many onions," I told her. "That's no trick for a fine lady."

"And who told you I wanted to be a fine lady?"

"I know you don't," I said. "But your father wants you to uphold the dignity of your position. The people expect it, too. And I think you might

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at least try to meet them half way."

She took no notice, just went on dressing. When she had finished and got her hair right, she took the last of the onions out of the huge jar and poured away the remaining vinegar. She threw onions and vinegar away.

"Good," I said.

"What's good?"

"I'm glad to see you are giving up this nasty onion-eating habit. I knew your love of me would be enough to persuade you to make this small sacrifice."

She picked me up, put me in the empty jar, put the lid on, called to her zekolo and went out.

That's the sort of thing you get because of being married to the first lady in Mars, Festus. Corked up in a pickle jar like an onion! She had never even thought of the possibility I might suffocate!

I drew my sword and tried to get the stopper off the jar, but it was a screw-on stopper and very tough. I could not shift it. So I shouted for help and banged on the glass.

It was a long time before anybody took any notice. Then somebody stopped outside the door.

"Is anything wrong in there?"

IT was Vans Holors, wrestling champion of Mars and one of the best of Martians.

"Vans, Vans!" I called. "Get me out of here!"

"That you, Don? I can't hear what you are saying."

Being shut up in the jar, my voice didn't carry so well, and Vans was naturally shy of barging into the Princess's dressing-room. Still, in the end he made up his mind that something was wrong and came in.

"Why, where are you?" he asked, looking round.

I banged some more, and he saw me.

"How did you get in there, little Earthling?" he asked, picking me out between his finger and thumb.

"The Princess's idea of a joke," I growled, wiping my streaming eyes on his handkerchief, which was like a blanket to me. My own handkerchief was so impregnated with onion smell that it only made matters worse.

"Eh," he said, "don't stand so close to me. You smell so strong of onions you make my eyes water too. Ah, these women, Don! Even my own wife, Olla. See!" He pointed to long scratches on his cheek. "I told her she was going to too many balls with that man Bommelsmeth, and this is what she did to me."

Poor Vans, most powerful man of Mars though he is, is absolutely ruled by his tartar of a wife.

"Women!" I said, bitterly.

"Ah!"

"Women are a plague."

"Too true!"

"How happy the planets might be without women!"

"You said it."

"Vans, let us run away!"

"What?"

"Let's both get divorced!"

"Ugh?"

It takes a long time for an idea to sink into Van's brain, unless it is anything to do with fighting. But in the end he got it. We would both get divorces on grounds of persistent cruelty and go to live in some distant Martian cavern, far away from the Imperial Palace, its glitter, its pomp and its domineering women.

"We will be downtrodden no longer," I said. "Come Vans, let us be free."

"Think it's wise, Don?" he rumbled, doubtfully.

"Of course it's wise. We Earth men never allow our wives to walk on us

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like this. It is time to assert ourselves."

"I know a good attorney."

"Then what are you hesitating for?"

"I'll go to him with you. But I'm a bit doubtful . . ."

"Pshaw!"

So we went, right away.

THE Martian attorney rubbed his hands together.

"You want two especially rapid divorces. Of course, it will be rather expensive."

"How long will it take?"

"Seven days. Your name please. Don Hargreaves, Earthling— What?" he screamed, suddenly. "You are Prince Don and you want a divorce from Princess Wimpolo? Why, the Princess would have my head chopped off if I dared! And *you*, Vans Holors, live in the palace too? You must both bring me applications signed by King Usulor himself before I can consider it for a moment. Till then, get out of my office. *Get out!*"

So that was that.

"We've been in many jams together, Vans old chap," I said.

"We have."

"But this looks like being the worst of all."

"Too true."

"But we are not beaten yet."

"How come?"

"We can run away."

He hemmed and hawed, he rumbled, he scratched his head, but in the end he agreed.

"Right you are, little sparring partner. I'm with you. We'll run away together."

And I was glad, because of all men on Earth or in the underground world of Mars, Vans is the best to have with you if you are going into strange and dangerous places.

SO, we traveled. We traveled in those transparent rolling traffic spheres of Mars. We traveled in vast air lines through gigantic caverns. We traveled on the shelly backs of spidery zekolos.

I had no idea at all where we were going. I was never much good at geography. And the geography of Mars is a matter of three dimensions with its upper caverns, middle caverns and inner caverns. I have not been able to get the beginnings of an understanding of it yet, and I do not think I ever shall.

Vans said he knew where he was going. I trusted him. Who wouldn't? You would think a Martian would know his way about his native planet. I might have known, though, that the only thing Vans really understands is fighting.

I began to get uneasy as we pushed on into wilder and wilder caverns.

"Are you *sure* this is the way to your home cave?" I asked him.

"Of course it is. All this country looks different because it was over-run by Bommelsmeth and his ape-men armies in the war. That's why it's got so neglected."

Which argument might satisfy him, but I was getting gradually more and more certain that no human being had ever been this way before. There was never a sign of a road, again and again we had to cross nasty swamps. If I had been able to see even a tree cut down, or a footprint, I would have been a little happier. Because then I would have known that somehow, at some time, some human being had been here before. But I did not find either, nor any trace of humanity at all.

"Vans," I said at last, "this *can't* be the way."

"I hope it is," he said, grinning foolishly.

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"Why do you?"

"Because I couldn't find my way back now."

I stared at him, and wished for once that that silly vague grin would fade off his face. Because, his wife apart, nothing ever worries Vans, not even the prospect of certain death.

"You mean, we're lost?" I demanded.

"Guess I must have gone into the wrong cave," he mumbled.

Then I knew for certain that we *were* lost. And being lost in the unexplored caverns of Mars is no joke. There are not even stars to guide you. Compasses are useless when they lead you into blind caverns, volcanic areas or underground rivers.

"How are we going to get out?"

"Ask the zekolos," he suggested.

Our zekolos, the crablike creatures the Martians use as horses, have uncanny instincts and, I sometimes think, some sixth sense we Earthlings know nothing about. If we were lost it was much better to trust to the zekolos than try to find our own way.

So we said to the zekolos, using one of the few words that the semi-intelligent creatures understand, "Go home!"

THEY stopped and looked at us, their stalked eyes waving as though wondering whether they had heard us properly. "Go home?" they seemed to be asking. "How in Mars do you expect us to find the way home from here? You take us thousands of miles into unexplored caverns, and then say, 'Go home!' as though we had merely gone on an afternoon visit. Do you mean it?"

We repeated, "Go home!"

They raised their heads, or rather, the front ends of their serrated shells, looking all around with their natural searchlights. Then they put out their lights, but I could still feel their movements, and hear the dry scraping of their shells and pincers. I knew they were peering everywhere with their stalked eyes, peering into the darkness that was lit only by the natural lights of Martian plants and animals.

If even the zekolos did not know which way to go it really would be awkward. Too bad, in fact.

They lit up again. Their stalked eyes waved at each other. They seemed almost to be discussing the problem. Then they lifted us down from their shelly backs and climbed to the tops of two nearby trees. Here they stretched their long, elastic legs till they stood dozens of feet above the ground, smelling the air perhaps, or using that queer sixth sense of theirs.

At last they came down, nodded to each other, lifted us again on their backs and started off in different directions.

My zekolo stopped, looked round, made some queer noise, then turned and followed the one that carried my gigantic companion.

We were going some place, but I wished I knew where.

I THINK you said once that you would like me to tell you more about the scenery of Mars. But I never was much good at that sort of thing. Scenery does not appeal to me somehow. You know what I mean. When the guide-books say, "The beautiful snow-capped mountains rising majestically beside the land-locked bay," it looks to me just like a bigger heap of stone than most, dumped there. And, everything in Mars being underground, there is precious little scenery to be seen, once you get away from habited places, anyway. Just a lot of darkness, like the inside of a soup-can before it's opened; apart from bits of

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phosphorescence from plants and natural searchlights carried by animals and birds. Sort of like millions of fireflies of gigantic size. You know what I mean. Many-colored, of course. The distant volcanoes you can usually see spout up red, blue, yellow and purple flames, flickering through their own smoke.

No, it would take a clever writer to work up much interest in the scenery of Mars. Cleverer than I, anyhow.

Anyway, we went barging through the everlasting night of Mars, I and Vans Holors, giant of giants, ten feet tall and over a ton in weight, thick-muscled and thick-headed, but always well-meaning and one of the best of fellows. We were trying to escape from the primordial enemy of men, women. I suppose they mean well, too, in a way, but it's a job to believe it sometimes.

The dim instincts of the spider-crab creatures who served us as steeds were not exactly the best guides it was possible to have, but it was a case of either wandering around ourselves, hopelessly, or leaving it to the beasts.

We saw many dangerous animals, the worst being the man-apes. But they did not attack us. The formidable pincers of the zekolos, which could snap their heads off like scissors cutting off the heads of poppies, warned them to keep their distance. One or two stones were thrown at us, but fortunately the beastmen had not developed enough intelligence to have mastered the use of bows and arrows. Otherwise I might not be writing you now to tell you how Vans and I got into this silly mess.

We killed one or two apes for food. I've tasted tenderer meat, but to watch the zekolos feed, well, I was jolly glad those terrible creatures had never been known to turn on their masters. A grown tiger would be a playful kitten compared to them.

SO, we blundered on. Swimming a stagnant sea, cutting our way through a forest of tangled creepers, climbing through chaotic masses of loose stones and cathedrals of stalagmite pillars climbing fantastic precipices. Nothing but fire or solid rock could stop those zekolos.

A different smell was in the air. A smoky smell, but not the sulphurous smell of the volcanoes. It was a civilized smell, if you know what I mean. Smells of lubricating oil, tobacco smoke, burning rubber and other smells that do not come except where men are. But I could not see where they came from.

Then the zekolos stopped. In front of us was a round hole in the rocky ground, metal-lined. A ventilating shaft of some sort way down there.

This was what the zekolos had carried us to through hundreds of miles of Martian midnight. The Martian equivalent of the top of factory chimney. The faithful creatures had brought us to the only human habitation anywhere near, but not to the main entrance. The front door of this place was probably quite close, actually, but there was no getting to it except by going hundreds of miles through the twisting labyrinth of caverns.

"Good," I said. "All we have to do is to find a way in. Find a door or wall and knock on it till somebody answers. If we get no answer we'll burn a way in with our dissolving rays. We have just about enough power left to burn a hole through a fairly solid wall."

But although we hunted for days we could find no door, and no wall. No sign of human habitation anywhere. Just that one metal-lined hole in the ground, and around it nothing but a

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tumbled chaos of rocks.

"Only one way out of this," I said at last. "We must climb down that hole."

"Not my idea of a joke, little man," rumbled Vans, shining a light down into a blackness that seemed to go on forever.

You would not fancy climbing down the chimney of a strange factory, would you, expecting to arrive in the inside of a furnace at the bottom, or between the blades of a giant fan? But there was no help for it. We said, "Down!" to the zekolos, and down we went.

With their pincers on the hand-grips, those zekolos went down that ventilation shaft pretty quick. And we had need to hurry, because the air here wasn't so good.

Some way down we came upon a hole in the chimney wall. It was round and small, far too small for the zekolos, too small for Vans, but just right for me.

"Hold your horses!" I called to Vans. "I'm going to see where this leads to."

And I ran along the tunnel, torch in hand.

It was a winding tunnel. I soon lost sight of Vans. Then, as I was running round a corner, some sort of trapdoor opened under me. I fell downward, into a sort of net.

Above me, the trapdoor clanged shut.

* * *

HOW long Vans waited for me to come back he says he does not know. He shouted, he banged on the metal walls of the shaft, he got the zekolos to make all the noise they could. But I did not come back. Nothing happened.

At last Vans decided that something had gone wrong. And that the only way to help me was to go on down the shaft and find some other way of reaching me. He went on down, with the zekolos.

Presently they came to the floor of the shaft. They stood on a large grating through which air blew.

Vans decided it was time to holler for help. And he hollered. The zekolos helped by making all the noise they could.

It seemed to make no difference to anybody. Nobody answered. Suddenly the grating opened under them and Vans went flying through the air.

"Now it's all up with me," he thought. There seemed to be a vast space under him and tiny lights far below. One light was coming up to him. It was a reflection of his own light, which was still bound to his forehead, and the faraway lights were reflections of the natural searchlights of the zekolos. He seemed to be falling onto a huge mirror. No, it was water. And Vans was as much at home in water as a seal.

He came up, swam a little way and called to the zekolos. They came cautiously, lowering themselves by their long, elastic arms. This water was very stagnant and slimy.

"Okay," said Vans. "Now let's find the quickest way out of here."

They found a rocky shore, where fungi of many kinds, some of it taller than Vans himself, grew abundantly. It was difficult to keep one's feet. Vaguely, Vans felt that it was a queer sort of place that he had gotten into.

Their way was stopped by a wall of frosted glass. Vans banged on the glass and shouted, although by now he had begun to resign himself to the hopelessness of finding anybody alive in this place. Hardly waiting for a response, he grunted a word of com-

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mand that set the zekolos trying to break down the wall. Vans was now in a hurry. Some of the odd giant fungi here grew out of human skulls as though they were flower-pots.

The wall did not splinter. Vans had by now concluded that he was in some ancient, deserted burial-ground, and was ready for a change of company. The wall, too tough for the powerful zekolos, yielded at once to the charge that remained in the dissolving ray. Atomic cohesion neutralized, its substance turned to gas where the ray touched it. A neat circle fell out.

Vans went through.

As he did so the place in front of him became, of a sudden, full of bright light. He blinked in a dazzling, cream-colored light that seemed to fill all space. A high-pitched wail of despair sounded in his ears.

* * *

WHEN the trapdoor opened under me, and I felt myself caught in a net, I guessed at once that I had fallen into a rat-trap. Martian rats are enormous, cunning creatures, and I am always liable to fall into traps prepared for them unless I am very careful. No doubt my body, as I walked along the tunnel, interrupted an invisible beam of infra-red light, operated a photo-electric cell and so set off the trap. Mars is full of such tricks.

The net swung downward on a long lever.

Whatever unpleasant surprise this particular trap had in store for the rats it caught, I did not intend to experience if I could help it. I drew my short sword and began to cut my way out. But the net was tough, designed to withstand the attacks of sharp and powerful teeth. I had to saw my way patiently through each strand. My rays I had thoughtfully left with Vans.

It was wasted effort. The net came down, landed, opened of its own accord. I stepped out. The net swung away.

I saw two glowing eyes above chisel teeth. A Martian rat, larger than any Earth dog, rushed upon me. Many rat bones were around. It was that cruel kind of trap that shuts the rats in a large cage with no food but one another. The hungry cannibal before me was sole survivor of many of his fellows.

I jumped to avoid him, but he turned in mid-air. He was old and lean and knew all the tricks of fighting. The ceiling of the trap was low, and I could not play my best trick, that was to jump high in the air, out of his reach. A desperate slash only half knocked away his paw, which tore my sleeve and deeply scratched my arm. I felt blood, warm and sticky, some of mine and some of his. I was cornered.

Half landing, he twisted convulsively, snarling, and was on me again. I had no time to judge my stroke, but could only stab out blindly. The blade ran into the flesh of his shoulder and snapped off. A paw struck my cheek a glancing blow, but I was too busy to notice whether it hurt.

My blow made him halt. He went back on his haunches, my broken blade sticking out of his shoulder, then launched himself in the air for a spring.

I tried to back, but was against the corner of the cage. The rat's body came down. I flung up an arm to shield my head from those teeth and claws, twisted my body away.

Down came the rat crushingly. I slashed, as well as I was able, at his belly with the broken sword. I felt it strike something, then my arm was

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knocked aside and pinned.

I was helpless, pinned hand and foot by the rat's weight. His great chisel teeth gaped apart and leaped, so swift, at my throat. Those teeth could bite, I knew, right through an Earthling's thigh-bone at one snap.

Then, behind the rat, I saw a giant hand. Even bigger than a Martian hand. It picked the rat up in finger and thumb. I, being held by the rat, was lifted too.

The pair of us were flung, whistling through the air at tremendous speed.

CHAPTER II

Pirates of Venus

THE scream, like a shrill scream of fright, that greeted Vans Holors gave way to a sort of sobbing. Blinking in the strong light, he saw before him half a dozen of the oddest-looking creatures. A little bigger than he was himself, they were more or less human, but their bodies and limbs seemed to be rubbery and elastic, stretching and shortening at will. They stood in a line before him, bowing together so that their hairless heads touched the floor. Many-colored fungi grew on the floor and walls of the odd compartment. There was unfamiliar machinery here, too.

"Who are you?" Vans asked, puzzled.

They did not seem to understand, but just went on with their bowing and moaning.

Vans grunted with contempt and turned to make his hole larger so that the zekolos could come through.

A sharp squeal. An arm, elongating itself amazingly, reached out and snatched away the box that generated the dissolving ray.

This action Vans understood.

Shouting, "Give that ray back!" he rushed forward.

The elastic man who had taken the ray dodged behind the others. Vans managed to seize the creature, but not before it handed its prize to one of its companions. Vans turned to chase the second thief.

The compartment was now full of an excited squawking and chattering. Even then the party might not have got really rough if it had not been for the zekolos. The faithful creatures, no doubt thinking that their master was fighting for his life, reached through the hole and seized two of his assailants in their powerful pincers and began to drag them toward the hole in the wall. An elastic man picked up an implement shaped like an ax and tried to chop off one of the arms. Vans hit him hard. The elastic man flew through the air, struck the wall with a dull thud, bounced off and landed on the floor, unhurt.

The other elastic men rushed at Vans. Vans began to fight seriously. He rushed at them, hit two with tremendous blows of his mighty fists. Both went down and rolled over. But they got up again at once.

A puzzled look came into Van's simple face. He couldn't hurt these people. The heaviest blows of his mighty fists just sank into their rubbery bodies without harming them. It was out of all reason. Their arms, shooting out the way they did, gave them a reach that Vans felt was not playing fair.

A snaky arm coiled round his ankles, nearly bringing him down. He struck at it, but the elastic man took no notice of his blows. The air was full of clutching hands at the ends of ten-foot arms. One gripped his left wrist, holding against all his efforts to pull free. Another coiled around his throat and eyes.

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That was the end of the fight. Vans found himself coiled round and round with thick ropes of rubber like a silkworm in its cocoon.

* * *

I FLEW through the air in the grip of the Martian rat, then suddenly we struck water.

We sank, but I felt myself free. I came to the surface, and saw the rat come up, look round and come at me again.

I had lost even my stump of a sword, so I turned and swam away. I knew I had not half the speed of the fierce rodent behind me. But a large object flew through the air and struck the water near the creature. It turned and made off in fright.

My rescuer was a giant man, bigger even than a Martian, who stood on a smooth stone bank watching me. His face and clothing were strange to me, unlike anything I had seen on Earth or Mars. I swam ashore, saying, "Thanks for the help," in Martian.

"You were lucky," he growled in a deep voice, neither friendly nor hostile, picked me up in a huge hand and began to carry me away.

We came to a large, tunnel-shaped room hollowed out of the rocks, full of strange furniture and equipment. My rescuer rang a bell and three more giants came in to talk about me in some strange language. I knew they were talking about me because they kept looking at me, and their looks were not friendly.

At last my rescuer looked at me and spoke in Martian.

"The others think I should have let the rat finish you," he announced. "You came here as a spy, if nothing worse. I saved you because I thought we could get information out of you. You had best give us all the information you can, or you will soon wish you had been left to the rat. Do you understand?"

"I am no spy," I said, "only a lost traveler."

"That sort of lie is not going to make things healthy for you. You talk the Martian language, yet you are only half as tall as most Martians and less than an eighth of the average weight. How is this?"

I explained that I was a native of Earth who had lived on Mars for several years.

He looked at the others, and they talked.

"Belangor says it is possible. What is your name? Where on Mars do you live?"

I said that my name was Don Hargreaves, and that I was son-in-law to King Usulor, Emperor and Overlord of all Mars.

He laughed nastily.

"You can leave out those lies. Who sent you here?"

"Nobody. I got lost in an uninhabited cavern and came down your shaft to find help."

"That sort of lie, Earthling, is not going to help you one little bit. Nobody has entered the cavern above our heads for a thousand years. Why should you enter it now? Who was with you?"

"I was alone," I said, not wanting Vans to be caught.

"You crossed those great swamps and forests alone?"

"Yes."

"And you came down the shaft alone?"

"Yes."

"Now we know you are lying. No man like you could do all that without help. And we will use persuasion until we get the truth out of you."

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He reached for me. I dodged his hand. He frowned, reached again. I avoided him again.

The others were now coming forward, helping their friend get hold of me. But I always move too quickly for any lumbering giant of a Martian to get a grip on me. And I was too quick for these giants, too. I jumped clean over their heads, quite an easy feat in the light Martian gravity. Then, before they could collect their astonished wits, I ran through the nearest door.

THERE was no light outside the door. A long, straight cavern stretched before me with many doors. I went into the first. A bird cage hung about fifteen feet up. I jumped, caught the bars, opened the door and threw myself flat on the floor of the cage.

But I had not thought about the bird. It was a four-legged green bird some three feet tall, and strongly objected, it appeared, to Earthlings entering its cage. It began to squawk and beat its wings nearly fast enough to blow my hair off with the wind it made.

A giant looked in, said something to the bird, and went out, looking for me. A search for me was in progress, voices shouting, feet running.

My hide-out would have been an excellent one, if it had not been for my companion. Presently it plucked up enough courage to make a sudden peck at my leg. The razor-sharp beak cut a piece out of my trouser-leg. If only I had had my sword I'd have taught him better manners. But, the way things were, I just couldn't spare the time to fight that bird with my bare hands.

The bird was obviously getting ready for another peck. I opened the cage door and jumped out. That dratted bird, not satisfied with the damage he had already done, came blustering and squawking out, kicking up such a stink that loose feathers flew out of him all over the place.

I went out, feathered nuisance following. The passage was ablaze with light now, but for the moment empty. Excited voices were everywhere. I tried a door. Drat it! It had a queer lock I couldn't turn. Someone was coming. I dashed through a door already half open.

I was back in the room from which I had orlginally escaped. Four giants were arguing earnestly, and luckily not looking my way. There was a large box on the floor, and, dashing to hide behind it, I found the back open and got inside. A lot of apparatus here gave a faint buzzing. Careful what you do, Don, I thought, or you will get yourself electrocuted.

But I still hadn't got rid of that miserable bird. Presently the giants noticed it, and tried either to catch it or to drive it away. Anyway, it went away for the time being.

Then there was a lot of talking and coming and going by those giants and those queer flexible rubber-men. But they talked mostly in that strange language. I couldn't get much idea of what was going on here.

Then, on a wheeled table, another giant was brought in, a giant in Martian clothes badly torn and stained with the slime and muck of a hard journey and grim battles. He was coiled from head to foot in rubber ropes.

My heart sank in despair as I recognized poor Vans.

THE fellow who had questioned me began on Vans.

"Come along now. Tell us the whole story. Who are you, who sent you here, how much do you know about

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us? You might as well tell everything, because your buddy the little Earthling, has already spilled the beans. We know it all, but just want to check up."

"You've got Don?" asked Vans, as though he could hardly believe.

"We have."

"I don't believe it," snapped Vans stoutly, "Neither you nor anybody else on Mars could hold that little man for long. Unless he was unconscious. He'd slip through your fingers like water. Where is he? Show me him."

"Well," admitted the giant, in a nasty grin, "he *has* slipped through our fingers for the moment. But not for long. We are putting our trained rats on his trail. They will follow him by scent, and when they find him they'll tear him to pieces."

"Don will kill your rats with his sword."

"I think not. Your Don has lost his sword already in one fight with a rat. He was caught unawares in a confined space, and if I had not rescued him he would soon have been cold meat. I shall not rescue him again."

Just then the noise beside me became louder, a light came on, and a voice began to give the news in Martian.

I had hidden in a radio set.

"THE police are still without clues in their search for the two escaped husbands, Don Hargreaves, Earthling, and Vans Holors, wrestler. Listeners are reminded that a reward of ten thousand crowns will be paid to any person giving information leading to the capture, alive and unharmed, of these two men. Princess Wimpolo is herself adding an additional ten thousand crowns for anyone who can catch her husband for her," said the radio. (Right then I'd have given a fairly big reward myself to get the pair of us captured by Princess Wimpolo.)

Descriptions of the two of us followed, then the rest of the day's news.

"The semi-annual ball at the Imperial Palace was a great success, being attended by. . . . . Some gloom was cast over the proceedings by the absence of Princess Wimpolo, who was unwell. A message of sympathy was sent, with the hope that her husband would soon be caught."

(That made me feel mean. Poor old Wimp was too upset to join in the dancing.)

"Rescue work is proceeding in the town of Horvin, recently overwhelmed by rock falls from a cavern roof. A serious outflow of lava is reported from the country of Cuspikor, and it is said heavy casualties may result. Good progress is reported in the campaign of the King of Ossalandok to rid that country of man-eating snakes."

A typical Martian day's news. Then came this:

"A very important item of news has just come in. A message on the space radio, interplanetary section, has been received by King Usulor, our Emperor and Overlord. It is from His Highness King Wyandott, Emperor of the cloud-wrapped planet, glorious Venus.

"Emperor Wyandott sends greetings to his royal friend, and wishes that every possible happiness and prosperity shall attend his reign. He also sends the information that the notorious Venusian pirate commonly known as Belangor the Butcher is still free, despite the efforts of Emperor Wyandott's space police to destroy him. Investigations, and the examination of radio direction-finding probes, prove that Belangor frequently eludes the patrols when approaching Mars. The facts seem pretty convincing that Belangor's hide-out is actually somewhere on the surface of Mars.

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His Highness, the Emperor of Venus, requests that his police be granted permission to land on Mars and conduct a search for this blood-stained criminal. There has not yet been time for a reply to be sent, but a high official at the Palace stated today that it was quite possible that permission might be granted. Precedents exist for this. It is not considered likely that Belangor, if he is on Mars, will have penetrated below the surface of the planet."

Now I knew where I was and who these men were. Vans and I had blundered into the hide-out of Belangor, Venusian pirate. I had heard one of them mention the name. Yes, everything fitted. Belangor *had* penetrated into the underground world of Mars. And the elastic men must be still other natives of Venus.

WHEN the radio finished there was a buzz of excitement. One of the pirates came and took away the printed copy of the news that the radio had tapped out while it broadcast.

It was odd, in this beastly place, to get a direct message from Wimp, her dad and my friends. I wished I could send back to them. But this set, powerful as it was, was only a receiver and not a transmitter. Perhaps I could oscillate, though. The radio was of a type I understood reasonably well, no doubt a Martian set stolen by the pirates. Detaching the loud-speaker, I fiddled with the wires. Any listener tuned in to that wave-length now would hear a series of long and short whining noises. I transmitted in English, since it seemed that the pirates would understand any message I sent in Martian. And I had not yet learned the Martian Morse Code, anyway. My hope was that some of the little Earth colony that lived in or near Usulor's palace would pick me up.

"S.O.S. S.O.S. S.O.S." I sent, since that was the form of letters most likely to be recognized. "Don Hargreaves calling. S.O.S. S.O.S. S.O.S. I am a prisoner of pirate Belangor in a deep cave. S.O.S. S.O.S. S.O.S. Vans Holors is with me." And so on with the plenty more "S.O.S.'s." I could not tell where the cavern was, but only hoped they could get some direction-finders on the job and locate me more or less before I had to stop transmitting. And it was not long before I had to stop.

I could hear howls coming from loud-speakers in other caverns. The other sets of the pirates were getting the full benefit of my oscillating. Pirates dashed about trying to find out where the interference was coming from. Two of them came to look at the set I was hiding in. I thought it best to keep quite still. A hand began to operate knobs and dials. I thought it best to re-attach the speaker then. Music at once poured from the speaker, to the surprise of the pirates.

Just then three great rats came scampering in through the door, snuffing and squawking excitedly. They made straight for the radio set, one over the top and one from each side. I was trapped among the valves and components.

I managed to electrocute one, burning out valves as I did so. The others were too wily for me. They nosed their way through a now dead set. If only I had my sword, I would have made a fight of it. Or if I had been able to run. But here I was trapped. I took a long sliver of glass from a broken valve.

"Those rats will eat up twenty thousand Martian crowns," I heard a pirate say. "We are losing the reward."

"What of it? I would not give up the

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secret of our hide-out here for twenty million crowns," another growled. Belangor, I suppose.

"No need to give up the secret," suggested another.

"What do you mean? Think we can let them go back and trust their promises not to talk?"

"Yes, if we send them back in such a state that they'll never talk again about anything any more."

"Wheeeee! You got something there. Collect a ransom, say twenty million crowns. I'm sure that Princess would pay that to save her dearly beloved husband from being cut up into little pieces. Then return him, same as we promised; but cut his throat first. Capital wheeze. Call those rats off."

Which they did, and not any too soon, either.

CHAPTER III

The Ace of Spades

BELANGOR hauled me out of the radio set. And his way of doing it was not a very nice one. He lifted me out by my ears. The pull on my ears and on my neck was pretty nasty. I felt so mad at him I could have spit in his eyes. And Belangor and all of them roared with laughter to see me kicking and struggling and trying to haul myself up by Belangor's wrists to ease the weight on my ears.

"So *you* are Don Hargreaves, are you?" asked Belangor. "Future Emperor of Mars? Well, you don't look much, anyway."

Another roar of laughter.

"Anyone went to buy an Emperor?" Belangor went on. "Going for one Martian sousa." (About five cents.) "Emperors are cheap today."

More laughter.

"No offers? Well I must admit he's a bit on the small side. And not too good-looking. Still, if he was well cleaned up he might look almost human, in a bad light. Of course, it's no use my trying to pretend he's sweet tempered. Not while you can see *that* expression on his face."

And a lot more like that, while I hung, squirming nearly all my weight hanging from my ears in Belangor's huge hands. Vans Holors, helplessly bound, looked on. I wasn't trying to fight just then. I was saving it up for Belangor.

Presently he got so pleased with himself with his jokes and the dutiful laughter of the "yes-men" round him that he got careless. He lowered me far enough for my toes to touch the ground. And I let him have it. Yes, sir, I kicked him. I planted my right foot squarely just where it would do most good. And when I say kicked, I mean kicked; not tapped.

Belangor didn't think of any more jokes after that. In fact, he didn't say anything you could understand. He just made queer noises as he leaned against a wall, opening and shutting himself like a pocket-knife and trying to breathe.

The other pirates were, for the moment, too amazed to do anything. But I knew that would not last long. I dived for the dissolving ray box, the one Vans had used, which had been brought in here and dumped beside his table. Whether these blighters knew what that box could do I can't say, but, anyway, they weren't taking much care of it.

One of the pirates said something, "Grab him!" I suppose, in Venusian. Anyhow, one of the elastic men plunked himself right in my way and put out his hands. I dived between his legs. Another one grabbed at me. I jumped. I swear I cleared twenty-four feet in

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that jump. But it wasn't enough. That elastic man just stretched himself, reached me and pulled me down. I have learned since that those elastic men can reach over thirty feet in the air when fully elongated, arms, legs and body. So it was useless for little me to try to jump over their heads, even though, on Mars, I weighed only about a quarter of my normal weight.

But I wasn't done. Not quite. I had a long splinter of glass in my pocket. I had got it from the broken valves of the radio set. A kick would not damage the rubbery flesh of that elastic man. He was too resilient. But a sharp edge could cut him, especially where he was stretched.

And it did; half through his arm with a rush of green, bubbly blood. He dropped me with a queer howl, and in a moment more I had doubled round him and got the dissolving ray.

"STAND back!" I bellowed. "This ray can kill all of you in one sweep."

Everybody froze.

I heard a whistle, but didn't know where it came from.

Through the crowd those three man-hunting rats, with glowing eyes, came leaping at me.

It only took a merest touch of the ray for each of them, and they all fell dead in mid-air, with deep gashes in their bodies and a queer smell in the air.

But the pirates were all round me. Those behind me might be seizing all sorts of weapons I knew nothing about. I swept my ray at the light hanging from the ceiling. It crashed. The place was in darkness.

I dashed to one side. Something crashed where I had been standing. I stabbed with the ray about where I judged the missile, whatever it was, had come from. There were groans. Something heavy fell.

I decided to try a little bluff.

"Now, outside, all of you! We Earthlings can see in the dark. Outside, or I'll cut you all down."

As I spoke I moved, so that anything aimed at my voice would miss me. Slowly, they all shuffled out.

I felt for Vans, cut his bonds and looked round the room by the light of his searchlight, still on his forehead. The place was empty except for one dead pirate and the dead rats.

Something whizzed past us.

I slammed the door.

"Prince!" said Vans, admiringly, "that was a smart bit of work. A real smart bit of work."

"Don't talk!" I said.

Outside I could hear Belangor gasping, "Gas them! Gas them through the ventilating system!" He was still half winded.

Three walls of the room were of solid rock, but the fourth looked more flimsy. I cut a large hole in it by means of what was almost the last bit of power in the ray, and looked through.

Darkness outside, and a gleam of water far below.

"Dive!" I said to Vans.

"Ah! But I am still cramped, Prince!" he said, but dived.

I followed, into almost inky blackness.

We landed in the same stagnant pool that Vans had first fallen into, with the giant fungi on the shore. Natural plants of Venus, I guessed, and the food of the elastic men.

The zekolos met us on the shore, and showed, by clicking their pincers together, how pleased they were to see us. The two elastic men were here too, whimpering with fright at having been captured by the zekolos, of whom they were terrified. They didn't un-

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derstand Martian, but I made them understand by signs that I wanted them to show us a way out of here.

Swimming to a distant end of the stagnant pool, they dived deep in that unpleasant lake and led us under the water. To Vans and the zekolos the swim was nothing, but I was in distress by the time we broke surface once more. I had swallowed a lot of that foul water.

Now we were in a vast cavern, lighted by many orange lamps on standards. There was much activity here, elastic men bustling about, and pirates directing them. These unfortunate elastic men were, I afterward learned, Venusians who had been captured by the pirates and forced to work for them as slaves. The pirates, I know now, were originally Martians who had left Mars countless years ago and gone to Venus where they dominated the timid, peace-loving people of that planet until the Venusians finally drove them away. Or at least, they were the descendents of those adventurers.

"Look, Vans," I said. "The pirate ship!"

AND it *was* a ship! It was the shape and color of the ace of spades.*

It had no portholes, only four glassite observation bulges. Who wants portholes in a space-ship anyway? There is nothing to see in space, anyhow, except stars.

But it was the color of the ship that proved it to be a raider. It was black, dull black, except that white dots had been painted all over it to represent stars. Such a ship would be as good as invisible in space, against a background black and star-sprinkled.

Space camouflage! An Ace of Spades ship!

Such a ship, rocket drive shut off, could creep upon its unsuspecting prey, unseen until the moment came to strike. Belangor, the Butcher, left no witnesses.

The black ship lay now on her side, resting on three large wheels arranged in a triangle. Each wheel rested in a grooved metal runway that vanished in a distant round, black hole.

"That's the way out, Vans," I mused aloud. "That tunnel obviously leads to the surface of Mars."

"That way out is no use to us, Don," said Vans sadly.

"Maybe. Or maybe not, Vans. We've got to think up some plan."

"My head's just splitting with trying to think up plans," said the simple fellow. "I've got such a sharp headache through trying to think up plans I could shave with it, if I had some soap."

"Let me think aloud then, and don't interrupt."

The two elastic men were stretching themselves out on the ground. Feet hooked round rocks, they stretched their bodies and hooked their fingers into crevices nearly forty feet away. They looked certain to snap any moment with the strain of so much stretching.

Suddenly, "Whang!" "Whang!"

Now they *have* snapped, I thought.

But they hadn't. They had simply unhooked their feet. The flying back of their bodies, stretched so tightly, sent them shooting through the air like stones from catapults. Such was the release of tension that they landed about a quarter of a mile away, got up and went to meet their fellows.

They had escaped us.

* The shape was a cone with a hollow base. The advantage of this shape is that it brings the center of gravity well back, behind the center of drive. The ordinary cigar-shaped space-ship has its center of gravity too far forward. It wobbles, rolls, spins and vibrates, and is difficult to control. It behaves as though it is top-heavy. This ship would be much more stable and comfortable to ride in.—Ed.

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Timid creatures! Vans' enormous fists could not hurt them, but they feared the pincers of the zekolos, which could cut their bodies in halves. Let them go. They were no use to us.

"No, but they'll tell the others where we are," Vans objected.

"And when the others get here we'll be somewhere else."

In the enormous cavern, lighted only in one or two places, it was possible to move a long way under cover.

"No search party could hope to find us among all these rocks," I said.

"And the trained rats?" Vans asked quietly.

"HELL!" I said.

Vans seemed to think I had some scheme ready to deal with the pirates' rats, which would smell us out like bloodhounds. I hadn't.

"Ride on the zekolos," I suggested. "They may have given the rats the smell of us from articles of clothing we may have lost, but I do not see how they can have given them the smell of the zekolos."

But they had, somehow. Presently we could see almost the whole population of the cavern after us, led by rat-bloodhounds on leashes. And searchlights, from the "dock" where the pirate ship lay, probed the rocks for us ahead of the party. But Vans knew a trick to beat that. At the proper word of command the zekolos reached up and began to travel upsidedown on the cavern roof, though how even those huge pincers of theirs managed to support the terrific weight of Vans Holors, I do not know.

Anyway, we gave our pursuers the slip. The space ship looked almost deserted now, nearly everybody having joined in the chase of us. And suddenly the plan I had been looking for came into my head.

"Vans," I said, suddenly. "We've got to stow away on board that ship."

"And what'll we do when the ship is in space? Mutiny, overwhelm the pirate crew and capture the ship? Or make ourselves parachutes and jump out?"

"All right," I said, offended, "if you can think of a better plan, let's hear it."

But, as a matter of fact, Vans was probably serious. He was brave enough, and dumb enough, to try either of the suicidal plans he spoke of, if only I had told him to.

So, carefully working our way round to the side where there were no people, we managed to get on board. We would not have done it so easily if the ship had been properly guarded, of course, but it was not. I suppose, in that secret cavern, Belangor saw no reason why guards should be kept round the ship. Served him right for being so careless.

So, Belangor's ship carried some cargo he hadn't contracted for. And it didn't take us long to find hiding places. When a space-ship is stocked up for a journey there are always plenty of hide-outs among the stores, fuel containers, air purifying plants and what-nots generally.

We passed a radio set on the way, with a printed copy of the latest news, just tapped out, lying beside it.

"Gosh, look at that, Vans!"

"THIS is Usulor, Emperor of Mars, speaking," I read.

I could just imagine that mighty voice roaring the words out of the loud-speaker, but on the paper, of course, it was just ordinary, cold printing.

"I have a message for Belangor, known as Belangor, the Butcher, renegade Martian and slaughterer of the people of Venus. Are you listening, Belangor? Then hear me. I have you

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in my hand. The whereabouts of your secret hide-out on Mars is known to me. Its position is," here he gave a latitude, a longitude and a depth below the surface. "Is that right or is it not, Belangor? Then know that I have you in my hand, and that that hand is about to close.

"I also know that my son-in-law, Don Hargreaves of Earth, and his friend and guardian, Vans Holors, are temporarily in your power. Note this, Belangor, and note it well. Unless these two are returned to me alive and unharmed you will regret it, Belangor. Note well. I say you will regret it, Pirate of Venus."

"So you are my guardian, eh?" I said to Vans.

"Well, ah, bodyguard actually. You see, the Princess was a bit nervous about you. She said to me, 'You know, Vans, that little husband of mine, Don, is a bit adventurously inclined. I want you to attach yourself to him quietly. If he goes anywhere see that you go with him to protect him. He trusts you! So I agreed to, but promised to say nothing to you about it." The massive Martian almost blushed in embarrassment.

Me, reckless! The ideas these women get! Then I laughed. It was my bodyguard who had blundered me into danger, and protecting my bodyguard had been one of my chief worries ever since I arrived in this place. Vans didn't think so, but never mind that blunderhead's opinions.

We hid ourselves in the pirate ship, me, my "bodyguard" and our two steeds, the zekolos. We found supplies of food and water, and made ourselves at home for a day or so. Of course, iron crates and pipes do not make exactly the best blankets or pillows. We couldn't cook but had to eat everything cold. We could talk only in low voices and had to be always watching the zekolos to make sure they didn't wander off and give us away. But apart from these and other minor annoyances it was not too bad.

WE COULD hear vigorous activity going on round us, and once or twice heard pirates talking to one another. Most of it was not interesting.

"Can't you get those something'd elastic men to load the ship quicker? The boss is in a towering rage," I heard one voice, one day.

"I've never known him in such a hurry," grumbled the other.

"Haven't you heard? Our hideout is known to the Emperor of Mars," said the first, excitedly.

"And so what?" growled the second, unimpressed.

"Usulor's army will be here soon!"

"Oh, yes? After they have tunnelled through two hundred miles of solid rock," said the second, scornfully.

"What about the shaft leading to the surface of the planet?"

"That goes up at such an angle that it reaches the open over three hundred miles away from here. *And* it's well hidden. Oh, I'm losing no sleep over the chance of their finding *that*. Or over the chance of their sending an army down it. Why, it would be suicide. We'd blow up both ends of the shaft and leave them to suffocate."

"All the same, the boss is clearing everything out of here. Fair stripping the place. All the treasure, proceeds of hundreds of years of work." (Loot, piracy and murder, he meant.)

"I reckon the boss wants to transfer it to his other hideout on Earth's moon. They say it's an even bigger and better place than this. It'll take several trips to transfer all the stuff and the people."

"What about this Earthling, Don, and that wrestler?"

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"Oh, forget them. I reckon they are dead by now. Or soon will be. Either they got drowned in that stagnant lake, or else they tried to return the way they came. If they are still about here they'll very soon starve to death. That's a *sure* thing."

Which disposed of us very nicely.

CHAPTER IV

Wyandott's Patrol

SOME time later the loading was finished. We heard exit ports slam, shouted last-minute orders, signal bells and whistles. Then the low whine of rockets, and the ship trembled under us forcefully.

"Vans, we're off!" I said.

"You're telling me!" he rumbled.

"Wish I could see out!"

But I could imagine it. The black, speckled ship, shaped like a giant sting-ray, was running on its three wheels along the runways, through and along the tunnel, toward the surface of Mars. Almost level at first, the tunnel would become steeper until we finally burst out into space almost vertically.

I found a porthole, and was able to look out. I had been mistaken when I said there were no portholes. There were, but they had been painted over, only very tiny holes being left, looking, from another ship, like so many stars.

The disk of Mars was falling away behind us, the sun appearing from behind it.

"Vans!" I said sharply, "We've been seen!"

A ship, shaped like the pirate ship but painted orange instead of black, was rising after us. A moment later several others came into view.

The fleet of Emperor Wyandott of Venus had sighted its enemy.

ERZIM KOFFIL, leader of the fleet of Venusian patrolcraft, snatched the report from his aide-de-camp and scanned it in one glance. He gave a whistle of satisfaction.

"It is Belangor, at last! Tell the entire fleet to converge upon him at once and attack. We will be rid of this scourge."

In his rubbery heart were unpleasant qualms. For the Venusians are men of peace, with no love of war and slaughter. But this was grim necessity. He must hide and fight down his sickness at the thought of killing. He must drive himself and his men.

Presently, he saw the rocket exhausts of a ship speeding away from him. Odd, he thought, but he could not see the ship that produced the exhausts. Only the red flares. He wondered if he was going blind. He must have his eyes tested when he got back to Venus. He hoped his men could see the pirate ship, even if *he* couldn't.

He began to radio to the stranger.

"Who are you? Answer, or we fire!"

No answer came.

"All right. Let him have it!"

At once the distant exhausts faded and died. Nothing was to be seen. The black vault of space seemed empty, except for the stars.

An odd, uncanny chill ran the length of Erzim Koffil's elastic body.

"He's vanished!" he thought. "It's magic!"

All the gunners on the Venusian ships were in the same confusion.

"What can we fire at? We see nothing," they asked.

Then an object like a very small space-ship appeared, only three feet across. It was that deadly weapon of space fighting, a radio-directed rocket shell. It streamed across the void and struck one of the patrol ships, penetrating the armor and exploding inside.

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"Epheu!" gasped Erzim Koffil. "Shells that come out of nowhere! This is witchery!"

Another shell streamed out. Another patrol vessel was crippled. And another. No shells missed, because the radio-operator, sitting aboard the unseen craft, could direct them right or left, up or down.

"Peuff!" exclaimed Koffil. "I shall have no sound ships left! This is like sitting in the dark and being shot at. I can't see my enemy to get at him! Call all the patrol ships off! No sense in getting wiped out without doing any good."

Then a curious phenomenon caught his eye. Among the stars in the sky appeared a white glowing line. Then another and another. Presently a round luminous object had appeared, a completely new heavenly body where all had been darkness.

VANS and I had scraped the paint off that porthole window.

"There he is," yelled Koffil. "At him!"

For now, very faintly, he and all his fleet could see, around the new luminous heavenly body, the outlines of a black ship.

"Funny!" Koffil muttered under his breath. "He seems to be on fire. A lot of black smoke is pouring out of his rear."

The black smoke grew to a vast cloud in which the pirate ship was soon again lost to view.

"A smoke screen!" exclaimed Koffil. "Boys, he's got us beat. I shiver to think what Emperor Wyandott will say."

* * *

"BELANGOR has pulled a fast one with his smoke screen," I said to Vans.

In one way, perhaps, it was just as well. Because, if the radio-controlled rocket shells of the patrol craft had got the pirate properly we would have gone west with it, in all probability. But now we were in a worse jam. If Belangor got away he would scour the ship to find who scraped the paint off that porthole. And I wouldn't like to be in the hands of that gentleman when he was in a real temper.

"Stay here, Vans," I said. "I'll be back soon."

"Where are you going?"

"Out for a stroll."

I slipped along a darkened corridor, dodging into darkened doorways. Being so small among these giants, I can dodge about among them without being seen where a man their own size would be caught. I was looking for the place where the smoke for the smoke screen came from.

Presently I found it. But there were two men there. I had hoped to find only one.

Seizing a chance, I slipped in and hid under a table.

"What was that noise?" one asked, looking round.

"I heard nothing," said the other.

They went on working, pouring the smoke out of the ship to enlarge the cloud.

Ten minutes I waited. Thirty. I got badly cramped. The worst part of it was having to be absolutely silent. I wanted to scratch, I wanted to sneeze, I wanted to cough.

At last one of the two went out. I let him get well away. Waiting my chance, I crept out from under the table.

I leaped.

A crack with a spanner on the head of that pirate. He fell backward. I wrenched the funnel of that smoke-machine apart. The smoke poured into the room.

(Continued on page 130

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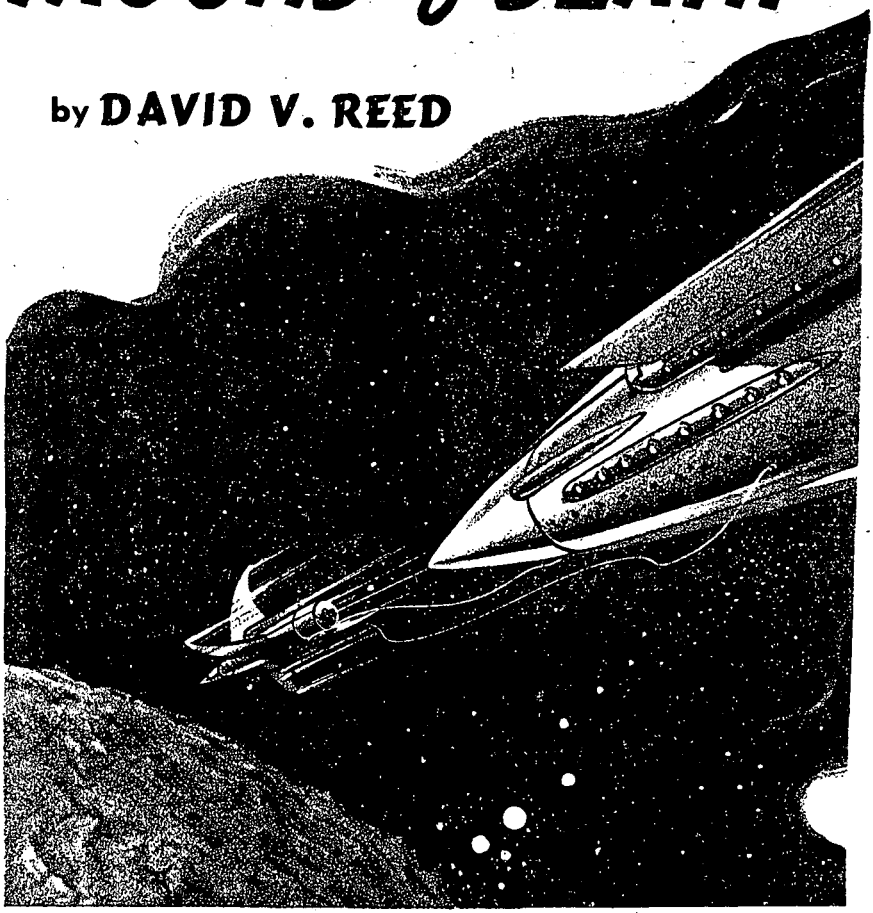
MOONS of DEATH

by DAVID V. REED



Hanley was the best "moon-diver" in the business, but someone was out to "get" him. He didn't know who until he found himself diving blind, compass wrecked, and a liner's fate depending on guesswork.

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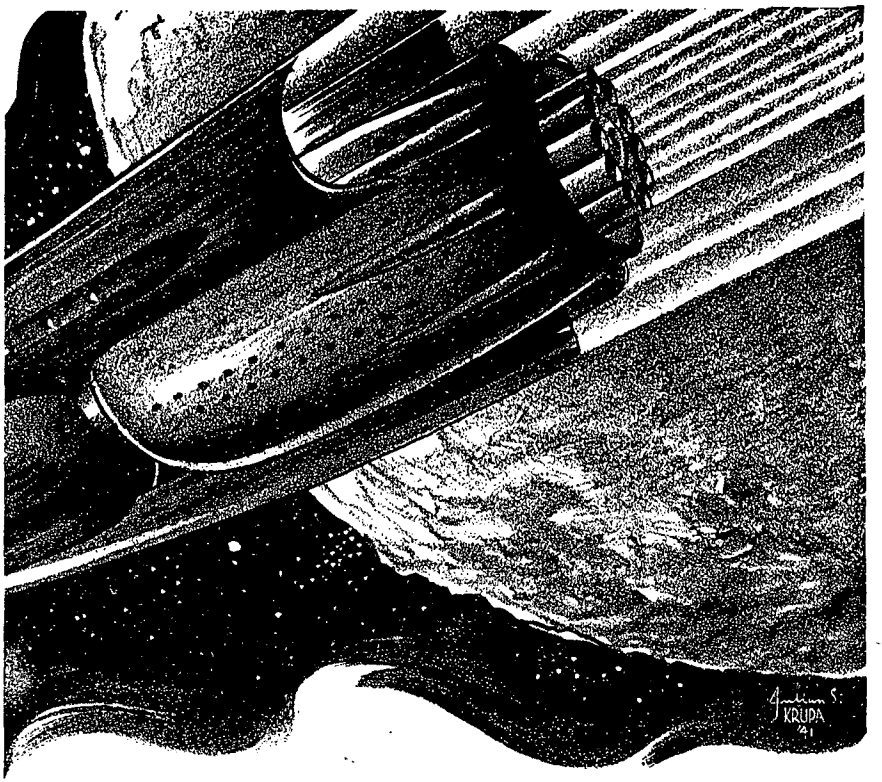

OLD Rugger Hanley said evenly, "I'm not drunk, Kieller, and you know it. Now give me those lenses and let me go to work."

Samuel Kieller, general manager of the Ceres Company, smiled. "I think you've had a little too much of that Martian *behla*, Rugger. I was watching you as you came across the field. You could hardly walk erect."

"It's nothing," said Hanley quietly. He rubbed a hand across his lined, weatherbeaten face, brushed back his greying hair. "It's just that after Tom Worth crashed on the moons. . . ." His voice died away. "You don't think I'd take any chances up there, do you, Kieller?"

"I'm not worried about you, Rugger. A moon-diver is one life, but when he's piloting in a space liner, hundreds of lives are in his hands. Remember that. Here are your glasses." Kieller opened the huge wall safe and took out a large pair of dark glasses. Stamped into the glass itself was the Interplanetary Patrol seal, Hanley's full name and his resignation number. Those special Haydite lenses were the key to Corellan commerce; they had to be carefully guarded.

Rugger Hanley took the proffered glasses, turned, and walked slowly out of the magnificent office. Even so, there was a slight hesitancy in his steps, as if he wanted to be sure he didn't stagger.

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Samuel Kieller walked to the great windows and watched the old pilot climb into the single-seater moon-diver. At the last minute, one of the ground crew had to help him in. The door adjoining Kieller's office burst open and a heavy, baldish man waddled in hurriedly. "Kieller," he said, "I've been watching old Hanley walk to his ship. He's drunk. Do you think it's safe?"

"Safe?" A crafty gleam lit up Kieller's eyes. "Hanley's diving in the *North Star*, isn't he? And she's heavily insured, isn't she? What if she isn't on our schedule? What if she happens to crash because old Rugger had a shot of *behla* too much?"

"But they can get you for letting him go up in that condition!" the fat man barked. "They're liable to see right through the whole—"

"They won't," said Kieller calmly. "Because Hanley won't crash. Not *today*. Drunk or sober he's the best moon-diver on Corella, and he'll bring the *North Star* in safely. But tomorrow the *Silverbeam* comes in."

"The *Silverbeam?* Isn't Hanley's son aboard that ship?"

"You have an excellent memory, Frazer. Yes, young Ronald Hanley is our new Navigation Officer on the *Silverbeam*. Rugger will want to bring that ship in." Kieller paused, lighting a fresh cigar. "I'll have a little surprise for old Rugger tomorrow with your help," he said, showing his teeth as he smiled. The fat man sighed and smiled with him, and in silence both watched the tiny pilot craft take off.

There was a sudden roar, a flash in the rocket pit, and the ship swept into the moon-studded heavens of Corella. On the inner side of the moons, they looked like pale green and white bodies, moving harmoniously across the sky in beautiful order. But they were more than that—they were almost the sky itself because there were so many of them. The 212 moons of Corella were a curtain that separated it from the universe, a curtain with tiny holes that showed now and then. Hanley's ship had unerringly darted through one of those holes the instant it appeared.*

Now he had gone up to meet the *North Star* two hundred thousand miles

* The planet Corella, first discovered in 3415, A.D. is surrounded by a complete curtain of moons —212 of them! These moons, of various sizes, together form what amounts to a hollow sphere, and inside that sphere lies Corella with its valuable minerals and plants, and the great city of Metro. The Corellan moons all move at different velocities, circling the planet, and as they move, from time to time there appear spaces between them which appear like holes in the curtain of moons. The only approach to Corella is through those holes in the curtain. A mistake in the speed or location of one of the moons is disaster and death on the outer, sun-baked surfaces of the Corellan moons.

In the early days of the planet's history, more than a score of ships were lost, trying to pierce the mystery of Corella. Then Malcolm Steinway devised a special instrument, the great Steinway Integrator. This instrument charted all the moons and their various speeds, and mathematically calculated the holes in the curtain. The holes must be passed at exactly the right instant, for they last but an instant.

Landing on Corella is possible only when a "moon-diver" or pilot boat comes out to guide a liner or freighter in, using its Integrator. The moon-diver goes in front; it is a fantastically fast vessel, but it cannot stay out for more than an hour. It meets the liners 200,000 miles out, gets in front, sets the speed for the liner to follow, then dives for the curtain. The liner dives behind it, and it always appears as if the ships are darting to certain death, but at the last instant the hole appears and there is beautiful Corella, shining underneath.

One other factor complicates life for moon-diver pilots. The two brilliant suns that light Corella with reflected light, spend most of their intense heat and light on the outer surface of the moons. So brilliant is this light that exposure to it by the naked eye brings on a peculiar blindness, known as "Corellan eyes." To guard against it, passenger and freight ships diving through always provide dark pads for travelers' eyes. Pilots, who must use their eyes to watch the Integrator, wear a special lens known as Haydite, which is made and checked by the Interplanetary Patrol, to guard against inferior brands being made by commercial companies if they should enter into competition.—Ed.

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out, to lead it in a dive back through the moons—lead it as only a pilot craft with the Steinway Integrator could lead the way...

Forty minutes later, the eerie whine of two ships coming in together could be heard all over the spaceport of the Ceres Spaceways Company. Kieller, chewing the butt of his cigar, and Frazer, standing beside him, looked into the heavens. The great moons moved in their various orbits and speeds, some slowly, some scudding along—and suddenly there was a gap among them and two ships came diving through, easily, gracefully, swinging in in wide arcs.

When Rugger Hanley climbed out of his craft, he didn't go chat with the officers of the *North Star* the way other moon-diving pilots did. He lurched across the field, talking to no one, disappearing from sight.

"Odd fellow, that Hanley," sighed Frazer. "Sort of a hermit."

"Been that way for years," Kieller said. "Maybe he's been in the game too long. He used to be pretty lively and a good mixer until he took to drinking *behla*." He crushed the cigar butt. "Works out fine for us," he said softly. "Tomorrow, when the *Silverbeam* crashes, we'll be through for a long while. Just as well the last crash will be above suspicion."

"JUST leave the capper * here with me, Nikko," said Big Mike O'Shea, the bartender. "No use trying to wake Rugger. He's full of *behla*."

The little Martian shook his head. In both hands he held tightly clasped a capsule wrapped in the yellow and blue paper that signified it came from Earth. He stood over the sleeping form of Rugger Hanley and tried to wake his master. It was long past the Corellan curfew, and the drinking house was empty. The police had cleared the place an hour before, and they let Hanley stay there only because Big Mike had said he would put up Hanley for the night.

"You hear me, Nikko?" O'Shea said as he swept the littered floor. "Leave the capper here. Rugger likes to read his son's cappers when he's sober, and it can wait until then." He approached the little Martian who refused to move. One of his large hands burrowed into the Martian's little ones and he took away the capsule from the silent Nikko. The bartender turned it around and looked at the writing on it. Suddenly his face went white. His hands relaxed and the capsule fell from his grasp.

"It can't be!" Big Mike gasped. "It can't—*Tom Worth's been dead three weeks!*"

Nikko nodded his head solemnly, and his green eyes flashed, as if he understood the shocking words. He stooped and picked up the capsule. O'Shea muttered as he shook himself. "Come on, you damned heathen Martian, we'll both of us wake up old Rugger."

A few minutes later, Rugger Hanley was sick from the stuff that Mike poured down his throat. He held his head in his hands and groaned. "I'm all right, Mike. Don't give me any more of that damned swamp syrup." He lifted his head and looked up, his eyes glazed. "Is that Nikko?" he asked. "What's little Nikko doing here?"

* A slang expression for "capsule letter". The small aluminum capsule contained a roll of copper wire on which a message had been recorded. This economical and personal method of communicating antedated letter-writing where no audivisor communication was possible. The cappers were bound in papers colored to denote their various points of origin; white for Venus, red for Mars, blue and yellow for Earth, etc.—Ed.

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"Rugger," said O'Shea quickly, "you've got to listen to me! Nikko brought you a message, a capper from Earth."

Hanley nodded. "I know. Been expecting it. My son's coming in tomorrow on the *Silverbeam*. It's all over now, Mike. He's going to find out about me at last . . . and it's too late to help me. . . ."

"Rugger! It isn't from your son—it's from Tom Worth!"

If old Rugger Hanley heard, he gave no indication of it "It's over now, Mike," he went on quietly, immersed in his own thoughts. "I've won. Tomorrow my son comes in as a Navigation Officer on a great liner . . . but he'll find out about me. . . . It's his first flight, and I'm washed up . . . too late to help me" His voice trailed off, then he went on, as if he had just heard O'Shea. "Tom Worth, did you say? He wanted to see Ronald. He loved the kid."

The bartender grabbed the jug of *neemsplant* extract that Hanley had called swamp syrup, and forced more of it down Hanley's mouth. Then he ran to the back of the bar and brought out the capsule-reader. He paused briefly when he took up the capsule, for he was breaking one of the strictest I.P. laws, but he broke open the seal. He took out the copper wire and inserted it into the reader, and touched the switch.

The mcehanical diaphragm began its sensitive speaking. *"Hello, Rugger. I'm sending this to you in a roundabout way—"*

Rugger Hanley started violently. His eyes stared up into space. He half rose from his chair. "Lord!" he cried hoarsely. "Tom—Tom's voice!"

O'SHEA held his hands to the switch. He shivered involuntarily as he nodded assent and tried to meet Hanley's gaze. "Nikko brought it here. It's a capper from Tom Worth. Listen!"

" . . . *roundabout way, but I'll explain that after I'm through with the important part of this message. Today is Thursday, the twelfth, and I'm going up in a few minutes to dive the* Cythera *through the moons. . . .*" As both men listened, the voice seemed that of doom itself, for on the twelfth, three weeks before, Tom Worth's pilot craft and the *Cythera* had crashed in a dive. " . . . *but I've just discovered something funny going on around here.*

"I can't tell you everything now, except a conversation I overheard today. You remember the way you commented on the luck the Ceres Company had this year, having two big ships crash and collecting insurance worth ten times the ships' value, just when it looked like they were going broke? I heard Kieller talking today, and I think he arranged those crashes!" There was a pause as the voice stopped, and the voice came more quickly, as if it were arguing. *"I know this'll sound crazy to you, Rugger, but I think the* Claybourne *and the* Skybird *were both his work. If my hunch is right, the* Cythera *is next and after that, the* Silverbeam—"

"No!" Rugger Hanley leaped out of his chair, shouting. "No, Tom—you're wrong! Not the—"

Big Mike held the switch until Hanley quieted down. He was still partially under the influence of the *behla*, and he was trembling. When Hanley nodded, Mike let the reader continue.

"Half an hour ago, when Kieller gave me my Haydite lenses, I thought there was something wrong with them. I sent those over to you today, on the twelfth, because I'm not going to use them. I wrote you to give them to your

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boy Ronald as a present from me, but that was a blind, in case Kieller had the package opened. Then I asked him for my auxiliary pair of lenses, and I'll use those today.

"In case I don't come back, for one reason or another, have those glasses examined. I'm sure there's something wrong with them. I'm sending this capsule in a peculiar way, first to Earth, and then I'll have it trans-shipped back here to you, because Kieller asked a lot of questions when I wanted my other lenses, and he may try to trace my mail and stop it.

"I'll feel awful funny if I'm with you the day you get this capsule and nothing's happened. I'm laughing already. So long, Rugger."

THE voice stopped, but the copper wire kept spinning until the rest of it had played out. In complete silence, the two men and the Martian sat there. The sweat was pouring down old Rugger's face.

"No," said Hanley, "it can't be. I've slaved too long and I've worked too hard." The quietness of his voice frightened Big Mike. "They can't do this to me," Rugger went on talking. "You know, Mike, now that my son's coming, he'll know the truth about me, and he'll be angry. He'll say I threw myself away, because I think it's too late for me now. . . ."

But suddenly Rugger Hanley sat up straight in his chair, and his lips pressed into a tight line. "Mike!" he said, loudly. "Mike—do you realize what they've done? Do you know what those butchers have done for their money?"

O'Shea shook his head. He couldn't speak.

And now, the momentary hysteria had passed from Hanley. "My boy's on that *Silverbeam,*" he said, speaking slowly, "and he's got Tom Worth's lenses with him."

"What?"

"Yes. I didn't wait for him to come. I sent them to him that same day. I wanted him to be wearing them when he came here on his first flight."

"But they may be your only evidence against Kieller, and if—"

"Yes, Mike," Rugger Hanley nodded grimly. "If the *Silverbeam* crashes tomorrow, I'll lose the chance to avenge Tom Worth, and I'll lose my son . . . and my reason for living the way I've been living these three years."

"What are you going to do?" O'Shea breathed. "Weren't you planning on diving the *Silverbeam* in yourself?"

"It isn't a question of diving it in," Hanley clipped. "The ships that crashed were up against something. Maybe the lenses, maybe something else. The *Silverbeam* has to be stopped from coming in tomorrow, before anything happens to her!"

"But how?"

"I'll work that out as I go. Nikko, you come with me. Mike, keep that capper here for me."

Before O'Shea could stop him, Hanley had walked, half stumbling, through the door, leaning on Nikko.

THERE were always lights at the spaceport. Day and night, no matter whether ships were expected in, the green-golden beacons lit up the great fields, the rocket pits like wounds in the smooth land. In the Communications Building, the operators were sitting, talking to the ships that were out somewhere in the void. Here the freighters, small and lonely, the gay liners, the military ships, let their voices be heard as they passed by, exchanging news, gossip, banter. The void knew no day or night. . . .

A small terra-car drew up noiselessly beside the huge Communications Build-

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ing, and a spare, unstopped figure came out. "Nikko," said the man, "wait here for me." Then Rugger Hanley went into the building. He entered an elevator and went up to the topmost story. When he came out, he was in the midst of the Section-At-Hand division, where contact was kept with the ships bound for Corella from all over the universe.

"Hi, Rugger," a short man called out to him. "What're you doing up this time of night? We haven't seen you around here in a long while."

Hanley forced a blank smile. "Hello, Charley. I'm being kept pretty busy these days." He paused. "Listen, Charley, will you do me a favor?"

Charley grinned. "Run out of *behla?* Here's a couple of bucks—"

Rugger gestured impatiently. "Thanks," he said. "It isn't that. Listen, my boy's coming in tomorrow on the *Silverbeam*. Do you think you could manage to let me get a message to him?"

"Hell, Rugger," said Charley, "I don't have to tell you that the *Silverbeam's* in the At-Hand section, and with the interplanetary clock at 22:04, most of the crew's asleep there."

"I know. Only this is something special. Could you manage to fake a navigation call, so they'll call him to the audivisor and I'll hear his voice?"

"You sure are nuts about that kid," Charley muttered. "Listen, Rugger, you know you're asking me to break all the rules? What the hell kind of a message am I going to fake? What's the hurry anyway? He'll be in within twelve hours. Can't you wait?"

"Tell him to watch out for asteroid fragments—anything, I don't give a damn. After that, there's a message I've got to give him. It may be important."

"Asteroid fragments, hmmmm!" Charley snorted. "If the chief ever heard me give out . . . Okay, I'll do it, but I must be nuts. Only remember you can't say anything personal. He'll recognize your voice, but you'll have to give him the message in third person."

"Thanks, Charley," Hanley said quietly. He could hardly conceal the fever that burned in him. The strain to keep his voice and manner casual was almost more than he could endure. He took Charley's arm and followed into one of the cubicles whose walls consisted of great concave charts of the void around Corella. Here and there tiny pin-points of colored lights marked the locations of ships as the lights moved imperceptibly along the charts.

"See that white one?" said Charley, pointing. "That's it."

"Sure looks pretty."

"Look out, Rugger!" Charley grabbed Hanley by one arm. "Hell, you almost fell right on top of the speaker!" Charley frowned as he looked at Hanley. "I can smell that *behla* over here," he said, shaking his head. "Now take it easy while I get her."

CHARLEY'S hands raced over the glistening black instrument board, touching levers and pressing buttons. A red bulb glowed brightly and Charley took the speaker. "Corella Ceres Company calling *Silverbeam,*" he said once. Then he repeated it.

Silverbeam in Corella Section-At-Hand," came the answer.

"Navigation warning. Is the Navigation Officer there?"

"That you, Charley?"

"Right. Hello, Fred."

"Listen, Charley, you know the whole damn crew's asleep. What the hell are you doing interrupting my reading?"

"You read too much anyway. Fred, can you get me the Navigation Officer?"

"You serious about that?"

"You're damned well told I am. You

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know the by-laws by now, son. Navigation warnings in person to the Officer."

"Nuts," said the voice. Then it added, "*Silverbeam* in Corella Section-At-Hand requests your line to keep open. The Navigation Officer is being called." A tiny, stifled voice added, "Nuts."

"Okay, Rugger," Charley whispered. "You take it from here." As he stood up to let Hanley take his chair, Charley said, "What's the matter, Rugger? What're you shaking like that for? Anything wrong?"

Hanley shook his head. "I'm fine," he whispered. "Just fine."

"Navigation Officer Hanley aboard the *Silverbeam* reporting," the audiphone said suddenly.

"Navigation warning," Rugger Hanley said evenly. "Unconfirmed reports of asteroid fragments. Suggest double watch all the way." He couldn't keep his hands still.

"Hey, is that—" the voice started, then stopped. "Thank you very much for the timely warning. Is that all?"

"Personal message to Navigation Officer Hanley," said Rugger. He felt Charley's hand on his arm and he shook it off. "He is requested by Rugger Hanley not to wear Haydite lenses sent him recently and to use the standard equipment of the ship. Have you got that?"

Rugger Hanley could hear Charley's sigh of relief as he gave the message impersonally. He looked up at Charley and whispered, "Get me a drink of water, Charley. I feel faint. Don't worry—I'll sign off."

The short man hesitated, then hurried through the door.

"Ronald!" Rugger Hanley said sharply. "Listen to me! You've got to get the *Silverbeam* to turn back! Don't let it land on Corella! I can't explain. Do you hear me? They're trying to sabotage the—"

"*Rugger — get away from that speaker!*" Charley had come running back into the room and he dived at Hanley. Hanley stood up and swung his free left hand, catching the short man on the chest. As Charley fell, he raised an arm and swung it across the black board. The red bulb went out suddenly. One word had come through the audiphone: "*What?*"

Charley stood up dazed. "You're crazy!" he barked. "Rugger, you've gone out of your head! Do you realize what you've done may cost me my job?" He brushed a hand across his chest.

"It may cost me more than that!" said Hanley savagely. "Charley, I can't reason with you now. I've got to get the *Silverbeam* to change her course! It's a matter of life and death for hundreds of people!"

"Get out!" Charley cried. "Get out of here, you drunken fool! I'll have the police here in five seconds." His face was a mask of rage and bewilderment, and he raised a hand over the alarm signal. "Get out of here while I try to undo the damage you've done."

Slowly, Rugger Hanley backed out of the cubicle and made his way down the corridor. When he came out of the building, he entered the terra-car. "Take me to 400 Metro Boulevard," he told the driver. There was no longer unsteadiness in his voice.

"YOU did *what*, Hanley?"

"I tried to warn them over the audiphone, Commissioner," said Hanley. "Not more than an hour ago."

Commissioner Paige of the Interplanetary Police scowled. He was in his pajamas and he was shivering with cold as he sat with Hanley in the foyer of his home. Outside the first grey

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signs of the Corellan dawn were appearing. "There'll be trouble about this, Hanley," the Commissioner said, sighing. "Of course, I'll wait until I've heard of it in my official capacity. And I'll take into account the fact that you're still upset over the death of your closest friend . . ." he grunted, "even if you did hardly ever see him since you took to drinking."

'You mean you don't believe me?"

"Frankly, no, Hanley." Paige took on a kindlier attitude. "Be reasonable, man. How can I have the course of a liner changed on the—uh—unverifiable scraps you've given me? Where is the capsule? Your friend O'Shea seems to have left his bar and you don't know where he lives. The mysterious Haydite lenses are aboard the *Silverbeam*. All right. Let's wait a few hours. The ship will come in, and then we'll have a look at them. Maybe there has been foul play. The Department hasn't overlooked that."

"But the ship won't come in! Tom Worth was right!"

"There isn't any sense in your exciting yourself this way, Hanley. You can see I can't do anything." Commissioner Paige drew his robe on. "Isn't it faintly possible, Hanley," he said, half humorously, "that all this is just a bad *behla* dream?"

Rugger Hanley rose and clenched his fists. "I don't drink *behla*," he said slowly. "I haven't had a pint of the stuff in the last three years you spoke of. I had some earlier tonight, when I realized that tomorrow my son would be here. It broke me up. But I don't drink."

"Ah," said Commission Paige, rising with Hanley. "So you don't drink *behla*, is it? Perhaps you can explain your constant—"

"I can't. Not unless I'm willing to give up my last chance to save that ship. And that's one thing I won't give up." He bade the Commissioner good-night and went back to the terra-car.

After that, Rugger Hanley lay in bed awake all through the night, unable to sleep. And all the while he was thinking, planning, working the thing out in his mind. There were only a few chances for Kieller to take to gain his ends. Hanley had to know them all in advance. There must have been something he'd overlooked.

For the rest of that night, Nikko, the little Martian, sat by his bed, dozing off and awaking just in time to light Hanley's next cigarette. It was very quiet where they lived, far from Metro, far from the spaceport and the men with whom Hanley had spent so many years of his life. . . .

THE *Silverbeam* was due in at 32:30, interplanetary time, and an hour after noon Corellan time, but Rugger Hanley got to the spaceport an hour ahead of time. Word of the past night's events had gotten around, and as he made his way slowly to the pilot craft hangars, he could feel the way people were looking at him. He felt very tired and he knew his face showed it. He had to be very careful now that everyone was watching him. There was no sign of his drinking now, and he hoped that most people would assume he was tired . . . because if they caught the answer . . .

The mechanics, with whom Hanley had seldom exchanged a word in years, clustered around him. One of them had a message. "Mr. Kieller said to be sure to see him before you go up for the *Silverbeam*."

Rugger nodded. He had planned to see Kieller himself. In Rugger Hanley's plans, Kieller was destined to play a leading role within the hour. But he was a bit startled to hear that he had

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been posted to take in the *Silverbeam*. Of course, Kieller had known that Hanley would want to bring that ship in; Kieller had conferred a great favor on Hanley by signing young Ronald on one of the Ceres Company ships. But that meant that they weren't going to discipline Rugger for last night's events. . . . Or did it mean that at all?

He had the mechanics go over the tiny pilot craft thoroughly. He was careful not to ask them more than the usual questions, not until they were all finished. Then he said, "Please check and see whether the sparkers are all set," then, hesitating, and as if he had thought it over, he added, "On second thought, get me a whole new line of sparkers."

Of course there was hesitancy; he'd expected it. One of the mechanices said, "But the ship doesn't need them, sir."

"She lost speed too fast yesterday," said Hanley. "I think—"

"But, sir," the mechanic interrupted, "you didn't use this ship yesterday at all."

"Didn't I?" Hanley said, cursing his blunder. "That's all right," he caught himself, "get a new set anyway. I'm not taking any chances today. If I could use a brand new ship, I would."

"Yes sir," said the mechanic. "It's a big day for you, isn't it?" He was a friendly youngster, that mechanic.

"Mind your business!" Rugger snapped. He was immediately sorry. He had been wondering which of these young mechanics was the one who would soon be sneaking away to report to Kieller, to tell him of the careful check-up he'd ordered, the new sparkers. One of them, certainly, and then Kieller would know. Hanley had to stop him.

WHEN the new line of sparkers had been installed, Rugger Hanley said, "Lock up the ship, please, and give me the key." The mechanic hesitated at the strange order, but he took one look at Hanley's set jaw and complied. As he gave Hanley the key, Rugger whispered, "Sorry I barked at you, son. I'm just upset."

As he made his way to the administration Building, just as he left, Hanley heard one of the mechanics say in a low tone, "The old boy's gone completely nuts. Morale shattered. Worth's crash must have . . ."

He wanted to walk away faster, but he kept his pace slow, his head down. There were more people at the Administration Building, standing in little knots. The news had spread fast. Hanley wondered whether it wasn't a good thing. Maybe all the publicity would stop Kieller because it would be too co-incidental.

No, it wouldn't do that at all. If anything happened now, they would be sure that Hanley had been crazy, and his unbalance had resulted in a tragedy. It was the best thing he could have done for Kieller. They could only say that Kieller might have exercised better judgment.

"Hello, Hanley. Aren't you going to talk to me?"

Rugger started. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I must have overlooked you. I'm all wrapped up in thought, Commissioner Paige."

"Come here a moment, Hanley," said the Commissioner, taking Hanley by the arm. "That's just what I want to talk to you about." He went inside the cool corridor with Hanley and stopped where they were alone. "I've been upset by the things you told me last night, Hanley. Frankly, I'm worried whether it's exactly wise for you to go up in your mental state." The Commissioner hesitated. "I've been wondering whether Kieller isn't showing more sentimental-

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ity than sound judgment in allowing you to go up today."

"Please," said Hanley, his voice barely a whisper, "stay out of this. I'm all right. I've been flying these ships for fifteen years. You know I wouldn't go up if I thought there was any reason for me not to."

"If anything happens—"

"Nothing's going to happen," said Hanley flatly. "Nothing!"

Paige smiled. "All right, Hanley," he said. "That's all I wanted to hear. If you aren't afraid . . . I trust your judgment implicitly. I was only worried you might show up, ah—"

"I know," said Hanley. "Drunk. I've never gone up drunk in my life." He turned away, walking down the hall. He didn't like the way Commissioner Paige had been looking at him; he couldn't take the chance.

Now that he was about to open the door to Kieller's office, the first doubt seized him. What time was it? There couldn't be much time left, and he had to act quickly and smoothly. He entered the reception room. "Mr. Kieller's waiting," said the secretary. "There isn't much time."

Rugger Hanley walked through the door the secretary opened. Kieller stood up from his desk. "Ah, Hanley," he said, cordially, "I've been waiting to—"

HANLEY closed the door with his back and stood against it. As Kieller spoke, he withdrew his hands from his pilot's jacket. In his right hand there was a short, blue barreled electric gun. "Don't say another word, Kieller," Hanley said softy, advancing. "I haven't much time. Open the wall safe."

Kieller's eyes held fear. "Hanley, have you gone out of your—"

"Open the safe."

It was the very quietness with which Hanley said it that got Kieller. He couldn't take his eyes off the gun. They had outlawed those guns ten years before. The old rocketeers had carried them. They could make a hole through steel, quietly, in a second. Kieller opened the safe.

"Give me Tom Worth's Haydite lenses," said Hanley evenly.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Kieller.

"I'll give you five seconds—"

The inter-office phone buzzed and a girl's voice called, "The *Silverbeam* is about to start her dive. Mr. Hanley must hurry."

"You haven't any time, Hanley," said Kieller. Hanley took a step forward. Suddenly, Kieller's voice changed, and a new light shone in his eyes. "All right, Hanley," he said. "You've got me—but you can't do a thing until you come down again. You've no time. Here." He handed over two pairs of lenses from the safe.

"So that's it," said Hanley. "That's how you got Tom. You switched both pairs on him."

"Yes," Kieller smiled wryly. "He suspected the first pair, but not the second. You know, the light from those moons is simply terrible."

Rugger Hanley went pale. The nails of his left hand tore his palm. "Who else did you use this on?" he said.

"No one," Kieller replied calmly. "I don't use the same idea more than twice, and in this case I used it once."

"What about the *Claybourne* and the *Skybird?*"

"Ah, yes. I had another little device there. I—"

"Mr. Hanley," the phone called, "the *Silverbeam* is starting her dive now. Your ship's ready. You're late."

"Hurry," said Kieller, smiling, "or the *Silverbeam* may join—"

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Hanley feverishly pointed to a piece of paper. If only he'd watched the time. Someone was knocking on the door. "Coming," called Hanley. "Write that down, damn you," said Hanley to Kieller. "Write fast. Put down what you said about Tom Worth." He waited, glanced at the paper. "Now write this," he said. "'I also brought about the crash of the *Claybourne* and the *Skybird* by substituting worn lines of sparkers in their engines, causing the rockets to lose speed and slow the dives—"

Kieller hesitated, then smiled as he continued writing. "Very bright of you, Hanley," he observed. "It's a pleasure to lose to a man like you. You've got me dead to rights."

" . . . and cause the pilot craft—" Hanley was dictating.

"Mr. Hanley! Mr. Hanley! The *Silverbeam* is diving! She's calling for the pilot craft!" They were kicking at the door now, hammering and calling outside.

"That's enough!" said Hanley. He grabbed the paper and ran to the door, and as he opened it, he heard Kieller call after him, "Remember a confession's worthless without evidence—"

HANLEY rushed through the office, bumping into people, ran into the corridor, putting the gun away as he ran, trying to avoid the throngs that were everywhere and not succeeding. Several porters saw him coming and formed a flying wedge for him, and he ran behind them to the ship. It was in the pit, tilted, ready for blasting. He fumbled for the key, gave it to a mechanic, then jumped inside. The door slammed behind him as he settled into his cramped quarters. He was still holding Tom Worth's lenses and the crumpled sheet of paper that Kieller had written.

He kicked over the bars under his feet, started the engine, let his hands touch the controls. . . . The sudden shock, the lift and tear of the rockets, the noise of the blasting. Ten seconds later, Hanley slowed his speed and peered through the glassite ports. He had been so late in starting that he'd missed all the usual holes in the curtain of moons. The Steinway Integrator, taking up most of the forward control board, was flashing brightly, its calculators marking the tiny figures and letters as they changed from instant to instant.

The *Silverbeam* was propably halfway through her dive by now. He could imagine the panic that must have been inside the hearts of the men on her bridge as she dived, unable to stop, without the sight of a pilot ship to take her in. The Integrator was ticking away, flashing, and the noise of the rockets were thunder in Hanley's ears. The fatigue of the sleepless night came up suddenly to threaten his skill, and Kieller's last words rang in his ears.

"Evidence." He had it. He had it with him. Some of it Mike O'Shea had, and the rest, the counterfeit lenses, Ronald Hanley had. He could get them together, but only if he lived, and only if he brought the *Silverbeam* in safely.

When he roared through the curtain, the twin suns of Corella were close together, and the moons were at their brightest. In his hurry, Hanley had forgotten to take his own lenses! But he had Tom Worth's. The lenses were made for individuals, according to their sight, but it didn't matter much to Hanley now.

He let out the rockets to their maximum speed and sat relaxed, trying to get the feel of the ship. She was going well; the sparkers had done it. How right he had been about the sparkers!

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Not that it had been so difficult to figure out. There weren't many places in a ship that could be quickly and effectively sabotaged, that wouldn't immediately be apparent in a check-up. But one had to suspect before one could exercise caution. And Hanley had more than suspected—he had known!

Where was the *Silverbeam?* It was time he had gotten her call. And there it came. "Hello, Hanley? Thank God you're up. We're halfway down. Can you see us?"

"No. Correct direction. Those suns are too close."

"Tack three points and a half port at present speed and hold it until we hail you."

RUGGER HANLEY set the controls and took a deep breath. He didn't usually have to fish for ships; he was up there in plenty of time, waiting for them, with time to spare. . . .

"Hello, Hanley." It was Kieller's voice, coming through the audiphone, quietly. "We're on my private line now, Hanley, and I thought I'd like to have a last chat with you. Now don't tune me out—this is important. You know, that was a celver thing you did at the port today, having those sparkers changed. The only thing is, I hadn't had them touched at all. You see? I don't use the same idea more than twice."

There was a dangerous deliberateness in Kieller's voice that made Rugger Hanley's scalp tingle. "I didn't count on the sparkers at all," he was saying. "Instead—"

"Hello, Hanley!" the contact phone bawled, drowning out Kieller's voice, "Can you see us now?"

Hanley pressed his face close to the glassite. "Yes," he said, as he threw open the switch to answer. "Changing direction and getting ready to dive before you."

He touched the controls slightly and the contact phone shouted, "Hanley—veer off!" He saw the dark shape flash by him suddenly and he kicked the bars until the sky was empty again.

"Did you hear that, Hanley?" came the taunting voice of Kieller over the audiphone.

"Hanley—what the hell is the matter with you? Who's in that ship with you? Stop that talking there and pay attention! You almost rammned us!"

"Can you hear that other voice?" Hanley called. A sudden flash of hope had gone through him.

"Only a mumble. What's going on? Stop it!"

"Kieller's talking to me from the port," Hanley said. "You know I can't stop that. He's throwing me off, upsetting me. Get him to stop."

There was no way to stop an audiphone voice from a spaceport. It hadn't been provided for, according to the I.P. laws, to make certain that a pilot always listened to the port instructions.

"Do you understand, Hanley?" said Kieller's voice, speaking very softly. Rugger Hanley gritted his teeth and turned the ship over in its dive, adjusting his glasses. The *Silverbeam* was a black spot against the light, and as he dove at it, the spot grew larger. Hanley's mind was in chaos. He could hardly think straight. What was Kieller saying? What had he said, in that quiet, contented voice, while the contact phone had shouted instructions from the *Silverbeam?*

"So you see, Hanley, your caution with the sparkers didn't help you," Kieller's voice returned. "What can you do without an Integrator?"

"All right, Hanley, you're well in front now," called the *Silverbeam.* "We're following, matching speed. Well done. Hold on."

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There were no more than five minutes left now.

"Look at your Integrator," Kieller said, softly, his voice just at Hanley's ears. "It looks all right, doesn't it? It was all right when you went up, wasn't it? Well, it isn't anymore. I saved my special idea just for you, Hanley. *I arranged with the kind aid of Mr. Frazer, to have your Integrator unbalanced.*"

SUDDENLY it hit Rugger Hanley. He had heard the words before, but he hadn't really understood them, hadn't listened, hadn't . . . So that was what Kieller had saved for the last! Not the lenses, not the sparkers—the Integrator—the one thing Rugger Hanley had never thought of, because he never had figured on Frazer being part of the conspiracy.

"Hanley, what are you laughing at?" the *Silverbeam* called.

Rugger threw out the contact sending phone, so his voice could no longer be heard. He was laughing almost hysterically now, and the tears were rolling down his cheeks. He was crying like a child, and then the noise stopped, and only the tears and the shaking of his shoulders showed that he hadn't stopped. He was diving now full into the moons and the *Silverbeam* was right behind him.

The moons were like great, hot balls of gold. Their light came up through his lenses and filled his brain. Rugger Hanley was quiet at last, his body motionless, his hands poised, leaping to the board and touching it, and the tiny craft danced with him. Faster, faster, the rockets blasting away, the moons rushing up, the light unbearable. A touch and the ship swerved, then swerved back again.

"All right, Hanley! Hold!" The *Silverbeam* called.

Then Corella was under him, and the moons above. The great planet was lovely to see. Rugger Hanley sat calmly now, guiding the ship in, spotting the spaceport and its huge markings. He was at home up here. He wondered whether he would hear Kieller's voice again, but the audiphone was quiet.

"Beautifully done, pilot Hanley!" the *Silverbeam* called.

CHAPTER V

IT wasn't an unusual landing, because no one knew what had happened. The pilot craft landed smoothly, and the *Silverbeam* lay down in her cradle, giving a mild thrill to the children whose parents had taken them to the spaceport that day.

Not till Hanley stepped out of the ship did he realize that there was something unusual after all. There was a lot of noise coming from the Administration Building, and he thought there were people running out to him. Then, at his elbow, Commissioner Paige said, "He killed himself, just as the *Silverbeam* came into sight." The Commissioner paused, then said, "We had hooked up a phone on Kieller's, and we heard every word he said to you up there. The others gave you up for lost."

"But not you, sir?"

"No," said Paige, "not I. Because I knew the answer. It came to me after you blasted off. I prayed I was right. Hold tight now, here they come."

The spaceport police was fighting with the mob that surrounded the pilot craft, but they let one through, Ronald Hanley. "Dad!" he said, quietly, taking his father's hand, "I just heard."

Commissioner Paige bent over and whispered, "Take off your lenses,

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Hanley. You're still wearing them."

Rugger smiled and took off the lenses. The three men began walking through the space the police cleared, in the midst of the cheering, clamoring mob. The Commissioner and Hanley's son walked on either side of Rugger. . .

WHEN the Doctor was through, he turned to the assemblage in the large room and said, "I think it can be done. It's a badly neglected case, but it's not too late."

A great sigh went through the room. Rugger Hanley smiled and lit a cigarette. "Now that that's over, where was I?" he asked.

"You were explaining the *behla,*" someone said.

"I know that voice," said Hanley. "That's Charley." He gripped the extended hand. "Well," he continued, "I had to have something to cover up the way I was stumbling everywhere. You see, when I lost my lenses on that trip through the moons three years ago, I didn't realize how it would develop. Ten, when I found out I was getting blind by degrees, I knew it could be cured, but it would mean that I'd stop working. And if I stopped working, Ronald would have stopped going to school. So I kept right on."

"But how could you?"

"I didn't know if I could," Hanley replied. "I'd been diving through the moons for twelve years by then. I used to think that I knew those moons backwards. I knew everything about them, when they parted and made gaps, where it was, their orbits, speed, their pock-marks—every damned thing.

"The only really dangerous trip I made was the first time I went up. I went up alone that time. No ship was expected in. I said I was going up for a joy-ride, but I didn't know, exactly." He took a drag on his cigarette. "It turned out I was right. I couldn't read the little figures on the Integrator anymore, but I didn't need them. Those moons were my friends. As my eyes got worse, I couldn't read anything much, and I used to glance at things and pretend I was reading.

"I'd bump into people all the time. I'd fall over stones. But the one thing I couldn't miss were those moons. I couldn't see much, but I couldn't miss those moons. Even with my glasses on, they used to burn holes right through me when I came at them. And I knew them by then. So I kept on working. I knew I wasn't really taking chances, yet, and I was waiting for Ronald to finish.

"Then, yesterday, I was afraid I'd gone too long, and I'd be blind, and knowing the kind of kid Ronald was, I felt he'd never forgive me. I still didn't want him to find out, but I didn't know how to stop it. I thought maybe I'd go on buying *behla* everywhere, so people would always think I was drunk when I came stumbling along."

"You gave it away last night," said Commissioner Paige. "I couldn't believe you at first, but today, when I knew you hadn't had a drop in hours, and I saw you running into people on your way to the ship, I remembered how you hadn't seen me when you first came here. I had the answer then, but it was too late to stop you."

"And a good thing too," said Ronald Hanley.

"Mr. Hanley," said the Captain of the *Silverbeam,* "would you mind telling me what you were laughing about while we were diving? I still can't understand it."

A chuckle escaped Rugger Hanley. "You see, Captain," he said, "I realized then that Kieller had done the one thing that was calculated to be the end of any pilot—if he could get away with

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it, and he did, but here I was, the one man to whom the Integrator was useless, and Kieller had banked on that. He could have done any one of a dozen other things. Oh, I thought about them all while he was talking to me up there.

"He could have hurt the rockets, the chambers, the contact phone, the control board. It wouldn't have been as simple as the device of the sparkers or the lenses, but since he was taking pains enough to throw the Integrator off—a really hard job—"

"And," interrupted Paige, "accomplished with the loving co-operation of Mr. Frazer, the only man here who could get to those things."

"Yes," Hanley agreed, soberly, "I hadn't figured on Frazer, or I'd have realized what I was up against, and how wide their field was. But when Kieller showed me how they'd wasted their opportunity, throwing off the Integrator, the irony of it almost killed me."

"Ah, yes," said the Captain of the *Silverbeam,* dryly, "it almost killed us all."

There was a noise in the back of the room. Voices were being raised. Then Hanley heard Big Mike O'Shea yelling, "But I tell you it ain't *behla.* It's Irish whiskey, good clean Irish whiskey, straight from me old mother in Ireland, and Nikko and me are going to drink with Rugger Hanley if we have to kill everyone in this room."

No one in the room was killed, after all, and they were still singing an hour later. . . .

(Continued from page 88)

that voice?—that familiar, that exultant voice arising suddenly behind her! "Eleanor!"

Wheeling about, she faced what she at first mistook for an apparition. Could this be Ronald? this dishevelled man with the face ghostly pale, although his eyes were agleam with joy?

But as he strode forward, and flung out his arms, she knew that he was indeed no phantom!

NO LESS surprising than the speed with which the Saturnians had overspread the earth was the rapidity with which the peril receded. Within a few weeks, while dozens of Electronic Space Rays swept the heavens to clear away the great cobwebs, the temperature of the planet returned to normal; the winds blew again as usual; the ferocious thunder storms, the floods and the droughts had dwindled to ghastly memories. If any of the monsters still ranged the earth, they had returned to remote, unpeopled regions; no trace of them was ever seen, except for some mysterious streaks of yellow-orange observed by mariners on an islet near Cape Horn, where the last of the invaders had been dashed to their doom.

As for the Planetoids—so mercilessly were they hunted by the Space Rays that, within a week, the most careful searching of the heavens failed to reveal even one of the great gelatinous balls. The watchers on Saturn, it was generally agreed, would not be encouraged by the results of their expedition! And if ever they should attempt another invasion, the weapons to repel them would be at hand.

Meantime, while paeans of thanksgiving resounded from all lands, the world's eyes were focused on two individuals. The nuptials of Eleanor Firth and Ronald Gates, which were celebrated a few weeks after the overthrow of the Menace, were the occasion for universal rejoicing, for nothing could have appeared more fitting than the union of these two.

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Robots

by ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

"GOOD God—!" the words burst bomblike from Tim Kermit's taut throat. "Sylvia!"

Sylvia Gaynor didn't answer. She would never answer again. She lay on the cloth-of-gold couch, her eyes closed, her hair a stilled storm of ebony, an enigmatic smile on her lips. To Tim Kermit that smile was vaguely mocking, almost like a taunt; for Sylvia had been murdered—

And the police were accusing him of the crime!

The injustice of it filled him with savage anger. An hour ago they had arrested him at the televideo studio without even granting him time to leave a note for Dutton, his boss. That was bad enough, since it might adversely affect the promotion he'd been

There was one thing about robot slaves; they couldn't tell a lie—yet this one did, and put Tim Kermit in a murder cell

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promised; but this present ordeal was worse.

Hotly he turned on the homicide sergeant to whose wrist he was manacled. "You've no right to bring me here to her home and make me look at her . . . like this!" And he tried to keep his gaze off the ugly Q-ray wound that marred the white perfection of Sylvia's breast.

But the detective stolidly jockeyed him around so that he was again forced to stare at the corpse.

"Why shouldn't you look at her, pal? You were in love with her, weren't you?"

"Once, maybe," Kermit admitted. "Not any more."

"How do you mean that?"

Kermit said: "I was like a lot of others at National Telecasting when she was a star there. Her beauty had most of us in a dream."

"Well?"

"Later we woke up," Kermit made a grim mouth around this.

"What caused the so-called awakening, pal?"

Kermit said: "She married a man with money," and flashed a glance of contempt across the room at Geoffrey Gaynor.

Gaynor, beef-jowled and swollen with the arrogance of the wealthy, gave Kermit a frosty smile.

"You think it was my money that won Sylvia?"

"I'm sure of it."

The fat man's smile winked off.

"Maybe you're right. She *was* a gold digger; I found that out. All the same, she jilted you and married me. That's why you murdered her."

Rage festered up into Kermit's gullet. He shouted: "I tell you I didn't—"

"Keep your voice down, pal," the homicide sergeant let the advice drip out of a corner of his mouth. "Yells won't buy you anything. Why don't you come clean?"

"I haven't got anything to come clean about! Why should I kill Sylvia? What would be my motive?"

"Jealousy," Geoffrey Gaynor again thrust in his verbal oar. "Because she tossed you over."

Kermit pivoted and felt suddenly as an abattoir animal must feel while awaiting the slaughterer's Q-bolt.*

"Damn you, are you deliberately trying to put me in the lethal ray chamber?"

"Precisely," the older man's answer cut like a winter wind. And his malevolent expression started a shudder inching down Tim Kermit's spine.

THAT shudder was spawned of fear, Kermit secretly admitted. He was no coward, but he was scared. You couldn't combat a thing like this with ordinary courage; couldn't fight the charges with your bare fists. Not when they'd been made by a man of Geoffrey Gaynor's importance. Gaynor was president of General Robots, Inc. What chance had a minor telecast executive against that kind of enemy?

He must keep calm, the accused man told himself. As soon as possible he must contact Dutton, his boss at the televideo station, and arrange for a lawyer. He looked around the room, first at Sylvia's corpse and then at the fragments of a smashed Gaynor household robot in a far corner, its mechanism wrecked by a tubular steel chair

* Q-bolt—the emanation of a radium gun. An isotope of radium, radium-Q, discovered by Le-Temps in 1987, disintegrates, under propitious circumstances, nearly 10,000 times faster than ordinary radium. Thus, it is possible to use it in the form of a ray which causes radium burns at such an enormous rate that the result is an explosion of the flesh cells. A person hit with a Q-bolt is not very nice to look at since the flesh struck by the bolt is severely disrupted and burned.—Ed.

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that somebody had used as a sledge-hammer. Then he spoke quietly to the homicide sergeant.

"Even a millionaire's unsupported word isn't enough to convict a man of murder. You'll need more than that."

"We've got more than that, pal."

"Meaning what?"

"It's a surprise. Even the newscasters don't know about it yet. A servant robot."

"That thing?" Kermit indicated the ruined electro-automaton in the corner.

"Nah, pal. That's just the one you busted when you realized it had seen you killing Mrs. Gaynor. You knew its testimony would convict you, so you wrecked it to keep it from talking."

Kermit forgot to stay calm.

"For God's sake quit calling me a murderer! If you think you've got proof of my guilt, drag it out and let's have it!"

"Sure, pal. Keep your tunic on. First let me ask you something. Do you agree it's mechanically impossible for a robot to tell a lie?"

The question puzzled Kermit. That was almost kindergarten stuff. Everybody knew that an electro-automaton was incapable of anything but the truth, undeviating and inflexible.* It was the way they were constructed.

Kermit warily met the homicide detective's gaze.

"Of course a robot tells the truth. So what?"

"You'll see, pal," the headquarters man growled. He tugged Kermit to a closet; opened it. "Take a look at what's going to put you in the ray chamber." And he gestured to an ordinary Gaynor robot servant, a current model.

A whirring hum emanated from the automaton's motivity center, indicating that it was in functional condition. Its polished viso lenses surveyed Kermit for a dispassionate instant; then, ominously, it leveled an accusing metal finger at him and said: *"You are the man."*

KERMIT felt his scalp tightening and sweat forming in his palms.

"What in hell's name—?" he gasped.

Again the automaton's electrovox dinned at him like some fantastic nightmare.

"You smashed the other robot, then blasted my lady's body with a Q-gun. You are the man." And as this doom-droning mechanical monologue continued, a picture leaped into Kermit's imagination; a picture as fully staged as any production he had ever helped Dutton, his boss, to direct at the televideo theater . . .

. . . He saw himself on trial for his life, saw this metallic monster in the witness box, its perjured testimony accepted as truth because it was axiomatic that an automaton could not tell a lie . . .

"But this one's lying!" Kermit bellowed as he brushed away the ugly vision and whirled on Geoffrey Gaynor. "And somehow I think you're responsible, damn you! You manufacture these robots and you probably know

* Camera-like, the Gaynor robot viso lenses record all events and actions which might transpire within their focus; but instead of registering the scenes upon impermanent celluplastic cinema film, all impressions are electrically conducted through a series of selenium converter-cells to the central magnetic braincoils.

There the impulses are sorted and chronologically filed on the robot's memory discs, from which at any future time a playback can be obtained. By virtue of a complicated process called magneto-synthesis, this playback is audible rather than visual; that is, the automaton's electrovox describes the selected scene verbally down to its minutest detail.

Obviously, because of the tamper-proof nature of the mechanism, it is impossible for the slightest inaccuracy to slip into a playback. In brief, a robot simply can not lie. It records whatever it "sees" and repeats whatever it records.—Ed.

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some secret way to alter their brain-coils. It's a scheme to frame me for a murder I didn't commit!"

The millionaire's mouth thinned.

"You'll never evade punishment with that ridiculous theory, my friend. Nobody on earth can alter a robot's memory discs."

Frustrated, rage-lashed, Tim Kermit turned back to the homicide sergeant.

"Take me out of here before I go off my chump! And for God's sake do me a favor!"

"Name it, pal. I'll let you know."

"Get in touch with my boss at the studio," Kermit pleaded. "His name is Dutton. Tell him to hire a lawyer—"

By this time they were outside the mansion of murder. And the sergeant's favors proved unrequired, after all. Someone came sprinting across the street from a parked electroglider; a tall well-dressed man whose mobile features revealed deep concern.

"Tim! Tim Kermit!" He called.

"Mr. Dutton!" Kermit answered as he felt a surge of relief and gratitude leaping through him like a warm tidal wave. Here at last was someone he could depend on, this man who was his superior at the telecasting station. Now he need no longer feel so friendless in the face of Geoffrey Gaynor's enmity.

He was aware of Dutton studying him.

"They told me you had been arrested, Tim. I came right away. Is it true that—"

"No!" the younger man answered through clenched teeth. "I didn't kill Sylvia Gaynor, if that's what you're asking me."

"But what about the robot's testimony?" Dutton said. "You had better shoot straight, Tim. For Loreen's sake."

That was Loreen Lane he was talking about; his private secretary—and Tim Kermit's fiance, if Tim ever summoned up enough nerve to pop the question. Just thinking about her made Kermit almost forget the depth of his present jeopardy.

He said: "Loreen doesn't think I'm guilty, does she?"

"She's waiting to find out. So am I, Tim."

"I've already told you," Kermit said. "In spite of that robot's story, I didn't murder Sylvia Gaynor. But I think I know who did."

"Who?"

Kermit started to answer, but the homicide detective tugged at his handcuff; interrupted him.

"No use accusing Geoffrey Gaynor again, pal. You can't make it stick. Come along, we got to be goin'." And he bundled his prisoner into a squad-glider; opened the propulsion tubes.

IT was evening when Loreen Lane came to see Kermit down at headquarters. A turnkey escorted her to the cell, grumbling.

"Visitor for you, buddy." And then Loreen herself was wailing.

"Tim! Oh-h-h, Tim, darling!"

Kermit seized her hands through the vanadasteel bars. Her nearness, her fresh young blondeness, filled his veins with the wine of elation.

"Then you got my message, sweet?"

"Y-yes, Tim. I hurried here as soon as I heard from you."

He smiled wryly.

"Thank you, beloved. It shows you believe in me."

"I do believe in you, Tim! But—but I don't understand why you had that note smuggled to me asking me to bring a powercar outside the jail—"

Sharp anxiety knifed into his low-ered voice.

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"Wait a minute, Loreen. You did bring one, didn't you?"

"Y-yes."

"Good!" he breathed more easily. "And now, with a spot of luck, we'll be on our way." Whereupon he leaned on the barred door of the cell—and his weight swung it open!

Loreen drew back in amazement.

"Tim—"

"Sh-h-h! They left it unlocked when they put me in here. So I got that message out to you and bided my time." He slid an arm about her slender waist, guided her along the deserted corridor. "The exit is this way. If nobody sees us we'll be in the clear around that next bend."

"But—but you can't do this, Tim! If you escape it'll seem like a confession of guilt!"

Subconsciously he clenched his capable fists.

"On the contrary, it'll prove my innocence . . . I hope!" Then there was a rear door directly ahead of them, unlocked, unguarded. Kermit and the girl scurried toward it, fled noiselessly into the outer night. Darkness spread a cloak of shadows around them.

At the next intersection rested Loreen's powercar, cumbersome and earthbound by comparison with more modern modes of transportation such as the swift antigrav rocket craft and the moulded plastic electrogliders. But the powercar was part of Tim Kermit's plan—because it contained luggage room abundant enough for his special purpose.

He slid into the operator's compartment with the golden-haired Loreen beside him; touched the controls that sent this outmoded but speedy vehicle scooting for the suburbs. Loreen nestled close to him, shivering.

"Tim, I'm frightened! First jailbreaking, and now excessive speed—"

"You can add burglary to the list before I'm finished," he chuckled without mirth.

"*Burglary?*"

He nodded while gluing his gaze to the roadway ahead. Presently he swung about, aiming for a palatial estate on his left. It loomed dark and sinister against the night's brooding background, a silent house whose recent guest had been death.

"Geoffrey Gaynor's mansion!" Loreen whispered.

Kermit braked his powercar to a halt.

"Stay here, my sweet," he said crisply. Then he strode off through the blackness.

HE was gone a long time. Ages, it seemed to the waiting girl. Even when he returned, it was only for an instant.

"Couple more trips should do it," he reassured her. Then he deposited an armload of metallic fragments in the rear luggage space and vanished again.

At long last he finished his burglarious mission; settled himself once more at the powercar's steering knob. Heading back toward town, he gave no thought to the possibility that Geoffrey Gaynor might be following. It never entered his mind.

"Are you game to see me through the rest of my experiment, hon?" he asked the girl at his side.

Her chin came up; she straightened her dainty shoulders. "I shan't leave you, Tim. Ever."

"Thanks, beloved." He was silent a grateful moment. Then: "What we need now is a place to work; a place where I can try to fit the pieces together."

"You m-mean you don't dare go home? The police might have lookouts there, hunting for you?"

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Kermit's fingers drummed a thoughtful tattoo on the steering knob. "I have it!" he suddenly exploded. "We'll call Dutton. Dial him now on the autorad, sweetling. Hurry!"

Swiftly the girl reached for a miniature wheel on the instrument panel, a wheel perforated and marked with countless numbers and letters. This was the powercar's autorad dial with which communication could be established with any citizen from one border to the other.*

Presently, from a concealed electrovox, there came a mellowly modulated response.

"Dutton speaking."

"Th-this is Loreen Lane, Mr. Dutton. I—"

"Hello, Loreen. You sound worried. Anything wrong?"

"Y-yes . . . and no. It's about Tim. He . . . he wants . . ."

Tim Kermit reached over, took the tiny microphone from her grasp.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir. I'm out of jail and I need a place where I can conduct a certain experiment."

"They released you, Tim?"

"No, sir. I escaped."

"Good Lord!"

Kermit said rapidly: "Don't misunderstand, sir. It was my only chance to prove my innocence. To pin the killing of Sylvia Gaynor where it belongs. And I think I can do it—if I can have an hour or two of absolute seclusion."

"You want a place to work? Certainly, Tim. How about my garage? You're welcome to it. And if I can help—"

Tim Kermit smiled happily.

"Thanks a million, Mr. Dutton. I'll be right over there." And he snapped off the autorad connection; poured more speed into the whirring powercar.

DUTTON was waiting; had the garage doors open when Kermit nosed his cumbersome vehicle over the threshold. At the front of the small outbuilding a workbench had been cleared and tools laid out in readiness.

"I didn't know what you might want, so I dug up everything I had," the older man grinned.

Kermit's gaze swept the assortment.

"Just the electrical stuff will be all I'll need, sir. You see, I'm going to try to patch up a smashed robot."

"You *what?*"

The younger man nodded grimly.

"I have a theory that whoever killed Sylvia Gaynor was caught in the act by a household automaton. To keep from having his identity disclosed by this robot, the murderer smashed it."

"Sure, Tim. But that second robot claims it was you—"

Kermit balled his fists.

"I know. The second robot accused me. But that accusation was false."

"Robots can't lie, Tim!"

"They can be fooled," Kermit answered tersely.

"Fooled—?"

"Yes. It's my guess that the killer did his stuff and could have got away without leaving a trace; but he wanted to frame *me* for the crime."

Loreen Lane came forward.

"How could anyone frame you with the second robot's testimony, Tim darling? It sounds so utterly, hopelessly impossible!"

* Each adult possesses his own individual wavelength assigned to him for life, thanks to the scientific way in which radio channels have long ago been split up into vernier segments—thousands of them being crowded into each frequency formerly allotted to a single broadcasting unit.

Whether at home or in your private conveyance, you always have some form of autorad receiver-transmitter near you. And to contact anyone else you merely look him up in the teledirectory, turn your autorad dial to the proper combination. At once your contact is established.—Ed.

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"It could have been done very easily, my sweet," Kermit said. "After murdering Sylvia, *the killer could have disguised himself to resemble me.* Then he summoned the second robot and allowed it to watch the first one being destroyed."

"You mean—"

"I mean the murderer maliciously gave that second robot a phony viso-impression. Permitted its selenium 'eyes' to record a counterfeit scene so that later the playback would mistakenly recognize and accuse me. Something like the old motion picture technic of a century ago when one actor would 'double' for another."

Loreen's hand flew to her mouth.

"But who'd do a thing like that? And how are you going to nail him?"

"Through the wrecked robot," Kermit said grimly. "I have an idea it was smashed because it witnessed the actual killing. And if I can restore its brain-coil and memory discs to working order, it may name the murderer!" He turned to the workbench. "Excuse me now. I haven't much time."

Loreen and Dutton fell back as Tim Kermit commenced his task. They watched him bringing shattered bits of robot mechanism from the luggage compartment of the spacious powercar; saw him fitting the pieces together as if they were parts of a terrifically complicated jigsaw puzzle. Slowly and laboriously the electrobrain took patchwork shape under his deft fingers; time after time he applied weak current, got no results, shook his head and started all over again. . . .

And then it happened.

AS if from nowhere a scratchy whir sounded. The whir grew shriller and became mushy syllables, metallic, misshapen.

"—my lady is being shot—Q-gun—she falls on the couch—dead—the man is coming at me—"

Loreen Lane's whisper was almost a quavering moan.

"Tim! It's going to name the murderer! Listen! It's going to name Geoffrey Gaynor!"

Kermit warned her to silence with his outflung hand. The patched electrovox was still blatting out its hideous message.

"—is coming at me—with a chair—to strike me—I see his face—he is—"

"No you don't, by God!" a voice roared. Something arced across the garage, smashed into the robot mechanism and again reduced it to shattered wreckage. "I destroyed that damned thing once and I won't let it send me to the lethal chamber now!"

Tim Kermit spun on his heel. His palm clipped Loreen Lane on the shoulder, sent her staggering to the floor in a flurry of pert whipcord skirt and tapered, kicking legs.

"Duck!" he yelled at her. Then: *"Drop that Q-gun, Mr. Dutton! This is one trap you won't get out of!"*

His studio boss was crouched low, a deadly ray-weapon in his fist, its muzzle trained on Kermit's belly.

"Trap, eh?" he panted in a madman's keening, narrow-chilling whine. "Maybe so. But you'll be the meat for bait. Dead meat!"

"Oh, no!" Kermit said quietly. "You'll do no more killing. You see, I've got a headquarters homicide sergeant hidden in the luggage space of that powercar and he's got you covered. His was the voice you thought you heard from the patched robot; the voice that trickled you into making a move that was a full confession of guilt!"

Dutton stared stupidly toward the powercar and saw the homicide detective emerging, guns drawn.

"My God . . . !"

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"Yeah, pal," the headquarters man nodded. "You'd better start praying because you're aimed for the cemetery. We've got you dead to rights."

"Y—you can't prove—"

"We've got our proof, Dutton," Tim Kermit said." You gave yourself away today, in front of the Gaynor residence. You quizzed me about the second robot's accusing testimony; yet at that early hour *no word about that second robot had been released to the newscasters.* So how could you know any of the inside details *unless you had planted the counterfeit scene on the automaton's memory discs yourself?"*

Dutton seemed to shrink within his clothes.

"I—I didn't—I didn't intend—"

"Of course you didn't intend to give yourself away. It was a slip. A bad one. The sergeant and I could figure out the rest of the story between us. Like a lot of other fellows at National Telecasting, you'd been infatuated with Sylvia; you'd been furiously jealous when she married Geoffrey Gaynor. That was your primary motive for murdering her.

"But you thought you could kill two birds with the same stone. Lately your studio work has slipped—*and I was slated for promotion to your job.* You knew this, so you planned to get revenge on Sylvia by killing her, then put me out of the road by framing me for the murder. You knew Geoffrey Gaynor would prosecute me to the limit if he thought me guilty.

"It was clever, Dutton. Nobody but an old-time televideo theater actor like yourself could have used a disguise make-up so perfect that it would fool a robot into thinking you were myself. But tonight, when you thought a broken electrovox was about to mention your name, fear made you tip your hand—and now you're washed up."

The detective sergeant snicked handcuffs on Dutton's limp wrists. Then he turned to Tim Kermit.

"Thanks for your help, pal. From jailbreak to capture, everything went like clockwork, eh? And now I suppose there'll be a wedding pretty soon." He cast a sly glance at Loreen Lane.

Kermit lifted Loreen to her feet; slipped a protecting arm around her.

"We'll send you an invitation, sergeant," he promised.

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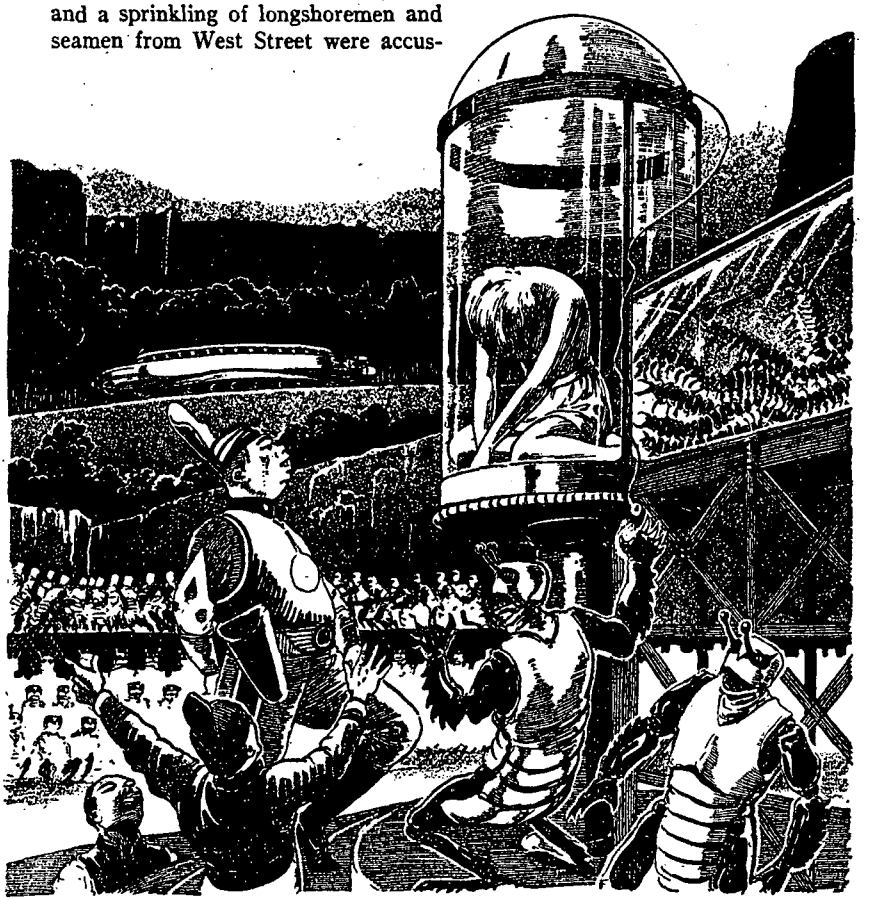
OTHER WORLDS

By WALTON BLODGETT

Two men stepped through the doorway to a world that lies unsuspected beside our own

THE first time I saw the kid was in a little bistro on Hudson Street, near Morton, a sort of Joe's Bar & Grill where the local gentry and a sprinkling of longshoremen and seamen from West Street were accustomed to drop in evenings and discuss politics and affairs over a refreshing glass. There was a particularly stimu-



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lating soiree this hot August evening in 1940.

As I entered a group of Democrats had flushed a Republican from a corner stool and were endeavoring to point out flaws in his argument. The Republican offered to adjourn to the sidewalk and thrash things out in the best Hudson Street tradition and on the way he picked up a few supporters whose staunch convictions sprang more from beer and a desire for a little physical exercise than from loyalty to the GOP.

There were other discussions going on at the same time. Strident harangues of the "Then I says to him, I says . . ." variety and snatches of song added to the uproar. Offers of a good, stiff smack in the kisser were being freely bandied about and the bartenders kept a couple of heavy bung-starters handy at all times.

He was sitting at the bar, right in front of the beer taps, not taking part in any of the talk. What struck me about him was the fact that he was obviously different from the rest of them. A nice looking kid, well dressed in a careless way, with a good, intelligent face and capable hands. There was something about him that was Small Town, although he wasn't a hick. Just a nice kid that had come from a good family and was lonesome in the city.

He was drinking a lot and I thought it was too bad. He just wasn't the type to be tying one on in this Hudson Street place. He had a desperate look about him and he was trying to listen to everything at once, like a man who had been rescued from a desert island and who wanted to reassure himself that the world was a companionable place, full of nice, solid human beings.

I lost track of him during a renewed flurry of fists right behind me as several seamen attempted to settle the international situation and a cop came in and said he was going to have peace and quiet on his beat if he had to run everybody in to get it. There was never a dull moment on Hudson Street.

I was finishing my beer when a voice said,

"Thississo unreal!"

He was standing right behind me, swaying a little, clutching a half-finished shot of rye in one hand and a small beer in the other.

"Unreal?" I said, puzzled.

He regarded me with enormous gravity, carefully setting his two glasses on the bar and lowering himself onto the next stool. He tilted dangerously over toward me and spoke confidentially in my ear.

"I could tell you things that would make you fall right off that stool, if I wanned to." He paused, impressively. "And what's more, I do want to. Right off that stool. You. With surprise." He stopped and seemed to consider sorting out this last series of statements, gave it up and went on. "Frinsanse, you think you know where you are, right here on Hudson Street. Right! What would you say if I told you that you are also, right this very minute, somewhere else? You don't know it but you are also sitting right under the Three-Eyed Idol inna Hall of Awful Shadow!" He tapped me solemnly on the shoulder. "They're all around you. You can't see them but I can. Hall of Awful Shadda — Shad— Shad-dows!" He regarded me triumphantly.

IT DIDN'T seem as funny as it would have been if he'd been one of the regular toss-pots. He was such a nice, serious-looking kid to be wasting his time drinking in a place like this.

"Have drink!" he said and tried to catch the bartender's eye.

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"You have a drink already," I pointed out. "You'd better go home and get some sleep before those Awful Shadows get you and you're taken away in the Paddy Wagon."

He looked at me in a hurt sort of way.

"You don't believe me! I'm crazy! Why don't you say it? I might have known nobody would believe me!" He got up, a picture of outraged self-respect and picked up his drinks.

"All right. You can go to hell. I can get along without any help from you." He wavered off into the crowd. I thought of stopping him and getting him home. He was such a nice looking guy. Then I shrugged it off. Just another drunk. In New York you don't stick your nose in. I went home and tried to forget him.

I was sitting in that little park where Eighth Avenue runs into Hudson Street the next evening, still thinking about this guy and his funny talk. I felt mean about leaving him there with all those drunks. I tried to tell myself that it was none of my business but it bothered me. He was probably lonesome and he might have started that rigmarole with somebody else and had his teeth kicked in. Then I saw him again.

He was walking aimlessly around, looking for a vacant seat. There was one next to me and on an impulse I yelled, "Hey!"

He came over and sat down.

"Haven't I seen . . . ?"

"Sure you have. Remember last night? You were telling me something about some Awful Shadows. I'm glad to see you made out all right. The boys in there were throwing their weight around for keeps."

He laughed.

"Sure, I remember. You must have thought I was crazy. Hope I didn't bother you too much."

"It takes a lot to do that. Sometimes you have to slug your way out of one of those places." He talked for awhile about unimportant things, the heat, baseball, the chances of getting a swim in one of the nearby pools. I could tell there was something on his mind. He seemed to be trying to nerve himself to tell me something. I was a little curious, because of his wild talk of the night before, but I also had a feeling that it would probably turn into another hard-luck story and I didn't try to encourage him.

Finally he said, "How about having a cup of coffee with me? I'd like to tell you something."

WE WALKED up Eighth to a drug store and got a booth there. When we had our coffee he fidgeted nervously for a minute and then blurted, "I noticed you last night and wanted to talk to you because you were the only one in there who looked as though he knew what the score was. Of course by that time I was too crocked to make any sense. The thing is I don't know anybody in New York and I'm broke and in a jam."

"Oh—oh," I thought, "Here it comes, the old touch."

"Don't get me wrong," he hurried on, "I'm not asking you for money and I'm not in trouble with the law. I need some assistance badly on some work I'm doing and I can't afford to pay for it. It's a tough spot for me, not knowing anybody here that can help me. I just have to take a chance on some stranger that I think I can trust and who is willing to take a chance on this thing. I'll tell you the story first and you see what you think of it. I am sure that there will be a lot of money in it and I'll split with you, fifty-fifty. This work you'll do is strictly on the

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level, nothing illegal. All I want is help in your spare time. It may be dangerous," he studied me for a moment, "and it must be confidential. You don't know my name or where I live and I'm not going to tell you until you've heard the story. I'll tell you then if you'll come in with me. You see, it's not entirely my secret and I have to protect myself."

In spite of myself I was getting interested.

"Let's hear the story."

"All right. Just remember that I can prove everything I say because this story will be pretty hard to believe." He gulped the last of his coffee. "You've heard of Zodiac Radio?"

"I own one of their sets."

"Well, that's where this business started. I was working for them, up until quite recently. When this new Frequency Modulation came out we put out a receiver for it and at the same time they started to try out other methods of static elimination. They wanted to get something new and exclusive. Zodiac is a small outfit but they were lucky in hiring a genius, Doc Potter, and they gave him his own shop and the green light to do whatever he wanted. I was working in the repair shop then and they gave me a raise and made me Doc's assistant. He wasn't a real doctor. We just called him that because he was always giving people his home-made remedies for whatever ailed them. These remedies were always Rye and a varying amount of tap-water, depending on the ailment, and he would give them high-sounding names. He was a great guy and lots of fun to work with.

"We worked on static elimination for months, finally coming up with something very good which they are going to incorporate in their next models, if the Army doesn't take it over, so Doc and I split a nice bonus. However, that's not the point of this story. While we were working on static we stumbled on something else that seemed even bigger. We had been trying the ultra-short waves and using entirely new principles which I can't tell you about, of course, as that is Doc's secret. I will say that we were trying broadcasting with beams of light, both visible light and invisible ultra-violet. That's not all of it but it will give you an idea.

"Anyway, the result was that one day we found that we were sort of rearranging things. Doc was sending from the shop and I was receiving in a shack outside of town. We had two sets sending, jamming each other, and were trying to see if our receiver was unscrambling them. It was the two sets, sending together, that did it. Doc noticed that some tools on the table turned grey and crumbled to powder. The table surface came up in a rash and everything between the two sending sets reacted in a funny way. We found out later that we had changed the atomic structure of these things. That has been done before, of course, but by an entirely different method.

"DOC was pretty excited about it. 'We are the Mad Scientists of Zodiac,' he would whisper hoarsely, 'And we have invented a Death Ray!' He would strike poses like Boris Karloff, rolling his eyes and gibbering. We dropped the anti-static work and began experimenting with this new thing. We had a lot of fun at that stage, putting on our Mad Scientist and Death Ray act and we had our secretary, Miss Bellknap, scared to death. One day Doc would back her into a corner and tell her that he was going to project her twenty thousand years into the future and the next he would chase

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her around the lab yelling that his secret process would age a person forty years in forty seconds. He liked to put on a big, false beard and creep up behind her and suddenly whisper, 'Hist! Have you ze papers?'

"After about two months' work we were able to focus the rays on an area about six feet square and we tried all sorts of things. Doc was always hoping that he could change coal into diamonds, or something. We also tried it on mice and ginea pigs and we got some amazing results there. Through Doc's secret process we stepped up the rate of atomic motion to such a point that our mice disappeared right out of this world. Then we were able to bring them back to sight again. For a long time we got nothing but a lot of dead mice in various stages of atomic disintegration but finally we found a vibration rate that brought them back to sight alive.

"About this time the front office began clamoring for some results so we put on a demonstration. It was only partially successful. We made some mice disappear but we lost our jobs. The way they put it in the front office, the old-fashioned mouse-trap did just as thorough a job in eliminating mice without all the expense of building a set and using up so much electric power. They seemed to think we were wasting our time so Doc resigned for both of us.

"Doc was offered the free use of a loft here in New York so we pooled our money and came on. We started with larger animals now. We got a big Airdale from the Bide-a-Wee Home and gave him the whole business. It seemed to scare him a bit but otherwise he was all right. You see, we were trying to make it safe for a human being to go through the process. We thought, then, that the animals were put in a state of suspended animation. It might be of some use in treating cancer and t.b., something better than the freezing process that they are working on now.

"ONE day a short time ago we put Gladstone, the Airdale into the Great Where-is-it and left him there for an hour and he didn't come back. Up to this time we had only left him invisible for a few seconds. Well, damned if Doc didn't decide to 'go after him.' He was crazy to try the thing himself and, besides, he had become very fond of Gladstone, claiming he was a dead ringer for Miss Belknap. I never could see the resemblance myself as I thought Gladstone was a very smart dog. I didn't think he was worth risking your life for, however, and I told Doc so but he wouldn't listen to me. I wish to God he had.

" 'Gladstone is his own worst enemy,' Doc kept saying, 'He is probably out there in the void, assembling all the wrong atoms into something a good deal worse than a dead fish which he is planning to bring back and lay at our feet. I'll have to catch him before he gets into trouble.' Of course we never expected anything *went* anywhere at all. Doc was just talking in his crazy way. I kept telling him it looked pretty ominous, Gladstone disappearing and all, but he had his mind set on it and nothing would stop him. He wrote a note saying I wasn't responsible in case he didn't come back and sat down on the leaded platform where the rays focused.

" 'Slip the business to me, Petey!' he shouted, 'Gladstone, here I come!'

"I turned on the power and waited in a cold sweat for Doc to disappear. The last thing that seemed to go was his grin, like the Chesire Cat in Alice in Wonderland, which hung before my eyes in a sort of after-vision.

"We had agreed that I would wait

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exactly three minutes and then I would pull the switch again and Doc would, we hoped, come back. It was the longest three minutes I ever spent. I kept wondering if I had killed him and, if I had, what I could do about it. I was shaking all over when the three minutes were up.

"I pulled the switch, not daring to look at the platform. There was a scrambling noise and Gladstone whizzed by me and shot under my bed with his tail between his legs. I turned around then and saw Doc climb off the platform and sit in a chair, breathing heavily. I was pretty relieved to see him.

"Doc took a deep breath and said, 'Wow!'

"Then I noticed that he was white as a sheet and his hands were trembling as he tried to light a cigarette.

"'Peter,' he babbled, 'There's another world there, here, all around us! We can't see it! Not until we change the rate of v-vibrations of our atoms b-b-by our . . . oh, my golly!' he gave up trying to light a cigarette and threw it away. 'It's an awful place! An awful place! It's like nothing you ever saw! Another world with light, atmosphere, living creatures . . . monsters! Nightmare monsters! Monsters with human intelligence that build huge structures, cities, everything!'

"I went over and shook him. 'Doc!' I shouted, 'Doc! Wake up! You're dreaming! You're having a nightmare! That set of yours put you to sleep!'

"'It did NOT put me to sleep!' He jumped up and began to talk more rapidly and excitedly than I had ever heard him. 'Ask Gladstone! I mean, look at Gladstone! Did Gladstone get those scratches in my sleep? No! Listen, Petey! Picture a room, a hall, so vast that the ends are lost in shadow and the ceiling is out of sight! A hall whose architecture is unlike anything on this earth, old as Time and solid as—as—well, solid! We are standing in the middle of it right now! You and I and Gladstone and the people downstairs and most of the people on this block! Two worlds, Petey! Two worlds existing simultaneously, occupying the same place in time and space, separated only by a thin veil, by the accidental fact that our atomic structure is tuned to a different speed!'

"I WAS still skeptical because I knew how Doc liked to dramatize everything. 'How could you see all that in three minutes? And what's all this stuff about monsters?'

"He had been trying to light another cigarette but at the word 'monsters' he twitched convulsively and crushed the cigarette against his chin. He threw that one away, too. 'Monsters! Bats! Big as eagles! Big as barns!'

"I made a mental note that the bats, if any, were possibly a little bigger than ours, but not much. Doc Potter is like that.

"'I was sitting there,' he pointed to the platform, 'Watching you at the set and then I was sitting on a stone floor, listening to the wildest howling I ever heard. It was like watching one scene in a movie dissolve into the next one. I was dizzy and felt as though I had just been waked up from a long sleep. For a few seconds I couldn't remember what had happened to me. Then it came back and I knew I was in that state, invisible to you. I looked around and saw I was in a huge hall of stone, a tremendous place! And the howling went on, getting nearer and nearer! I didn't dare move. I was afraid I'd get out of the zone of influence of the beam. Then a huge shadow moved against the darkness where the ceiling ought to be! It was

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like a bat, flying. Then there was another and another and more, until I lost count. Their eyes glittered like cats' eyes! It was awful to see them circling up there!

" 'Suddenly Gladstone appeared. He must have been hiding under something to get away from the bats. When I first saw him he was in full flight, racing across the floor to me. He crashed into me and crowded up against my legs, trembling. I don't blame him, I was scared myself!

" 'The bats, or whatever they were, dipped down, circling the hall faster and faster, closing in on Gladstone and me. One bat banked up steeply, turned and dove straight at us! Petey, it had a human face! I swear it! I jumped up and hit at it and I could feel its teeth against my knuckles! It screamed like a woman and went off, still screaming. The others were coming, volplaning down at me! I could hear the leathery rustle of their wings above the screaming and howling, and smell them! Ugh! Then, suddenly . . . I was here with you.' He mopped his forehead with a shaky hand. 'God, I'm glad we agreed on only three minutes! Another minute there and old man Potter's little boy would be . . . would . . . y'know, I think I'm going to pass out!'

"He did.

"Next day, of course, nothing would do but he had to go back to the 'Hall of Awful Shadow,' as he called it. I didn't like the idea at all but if you knew Potter you'd know how hard it was to argue him out of anything he'd set his mind on. He had half convinced me of the existence of this other world. I had never seen him so serious and excited. You could generally tell by the look in his eye when he was pulling one of his long-winded practical jokes. And there was Gladstone, so scared we had to drag him out from under the bed to treat several long, jagged scars on his back and flanks. Doc said that when we put Gladstone through the zone he must have wandered, or been scared out of the zone of influence and the bats had attacked him.

"He took a gun, a flashlight and some chalk to mark the place on the floor of the hall where the control zone of the beam was effective and I put him through. We had agreed that I would tune him back in exactly thirty minutes.

"You've probably guessed the rest. He didn't come back this time. I wouldn't be bothering you with this story if he had."

THE kid, Petey I gathered his name was, rubbed his hands nervously over his face.

"I spent twenty-four hours by the set, turning on the beam every thirty minutes but nothing happened. You see, we can't leave it open all the time. It uses up too much juice. I rigged up an automatic switch-off with an old alarm clock and went through myself." He shuddered. "Doc was right. There *is* another world, just as he said. I've seen it too, now. I never want to see it again! But I've got to go back, to find Doc if he's still alive."

"What was it like?" I asked.

"It was awful! I can't describe it. I was there for only thirty minutes and I just got back to the zone by seconds. That automatic switch I rigged up is unreliable and if anything should happen to it while I'm in there neither Doc nor I could ever get out. That's why I need help. I need somebody to work the set while I'm in there.

"I wouldn't blame you if you said I was crazy and walked out on me. It's such a crazy story. But if you'll let me, I'll prove right now that everything I've said is true!"

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I sat for a long time, looking into my empty coffee cup.

"If you have any sense at all," I said to myself, "you'll get out of this business right now . . . and regret it the rest of your life!" Something about the whole thing, the serious, worried kid and the story of impossible adventure, appealed strongly to me. I looked up at him.

"I'm in! I don't know a thing about radio, but . . ."

"You'll help!" he exclaimed. "You don't have to know anything. It's simple to work the set. I can show you how." He didn't thank me but I could tell from the look of intense relief on his face that he was grateful.

HE TOOK me to the loft where they had set up their equipment, a large, grimy room on the fourth floor of an old building on Christopher Street. A big, battered Airedale who turned out to be Gladstone leaped and cavorted around us. There was a bare amount of furniture; two cots, several chairs and tables, an old-fashioned wardrobe. In one corner by a chipped sink stood an old oil stove and a cupboard containing canned foods and broken eating utensils. In the center of the room, on either side of a raised platform, stood two objects that looked to me like radio transmitters. They seemed quite simple to my untrained eye, built with an extreme economy of material. No cabinets hid any of the parts which were right out in the open and as far as I could tell looked like the standard parts of a radio sending set. Around the room clothes were hung on nails hammered in the wall or piled dustily on the floor. Everything was a jumble of disorder, dust and Gladstone, who seemed to be everywhere at once, knocking things over with a wildly gyrating tail. I was a little disappointed in the whole set-up. I had expected to see a large, gleaming laboratory full of strange, humming machines, colored lights blinking on and off, glowing coils and banks of switches and dials.

"You mean to tell me that this pile of junk will send a person into another world?" I asked.

The boy, Petey, removed Gladstone from between his legs.

"We were operating on a shoestring. I don't expect you to be impressed by its looks, just by its results."

He threw a switch at the bottom of the instrument panel of each set. Tubes slowly came to life and hummed softly, glowing with varying intensities of light. He waited a moment, apparently giving the sets time to warm up thoroughly, then turned a knob that caused the humming to rise to a high-pitched whine and then fade away to silence. At this point he turned another switch and looked nervously and expectantly at the platform between the sets. Nothing happened. He said, "Nothing," under his breath and cut the second switch off again. The air was full of tension, possibly caused by the power that was being focused on the platform. I could feel my skin tingling and Gladstone disappeared under the bed with a yelp of fear.

"All right, here goes experiment one," Petey said. He took a cage containing two white mice from a shelf and put it on the platform. Once more he cut in the switch and the cage, mice and all, disappeared completely. It was weird. He cut the switch and looked at me expectantly.

"See? Those mice are on the stone floor of Potter's 'Hall of Awful Shadows.'"

I walked over to the platform and felt around gingerly, not trusting my eyes. There was nothing there. I ran

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my hands over the whole thing and passed them through the air overhead.

"Now watch," said Petey. He cut the switch in again and there were the mice in their cage, squeaking and running around excitedly.

"Well, I'll be damned!" It was all I could think of to say.

WE WORKED with the thing all night, making objects disappear and appear again while Petey showed me how to operate it. It was a wonderful thing, all right. Finally, when I knew just how to turn the switches in their proper order, Petey got on the platform and I made him disappear. In spite of having seen the mice and the other things go through and come out intact it was a nerve-racking experience to see a human being vanish in thin air and to know that I was responsible for his safety. I cut him back almost immediately.

"What was it like this time? Did I do all right?" I asked.

His face was white and serious.

"It's night there, too," he said. "Couldn't see a thing. You did all right. Now if you can get me a gun and a flashlight I had better go through and make a long search for Potter."

After breakfast I went home and put on some old clothes. I had a good gun, a handy little automatic. I put it in my pocket and went out for a box of ammunition, a flashlight and a good hunting-knife.

Petey met me at the door. He looked nervous.

"Did you get everything? I'm all ready to go."

"You're not going," I said. "Don't argue with me. I'm the one that's going. I can turn those switches on and off all right but if anything went wrong with that set I'd be helpless and there'd be two of you stuck out there. It's much more sensible for me to go and you to stay here at the controls. We'd all have a better chance."

He tried to argue with me but he finally had to admit that I was right We agreed that I would make a preliminary survey of a half an hour or an hour to learn what I would be up against. We synchronized our watches and Petey promised to tune the Zone back in every thirty minutes until I came back. He cautioned me to make sure the floor was still marked on the other side, so I could find the control-zone. I still couldn't make out what it was like there from Petey's rather colorless account. I gathered he didn't like to talk about it much.

"What about those bats?" I asked him.

"Doc says he saw them. I never did. However, be on your guard all the time. He may not have been fooling about them."

He stepped to the set and I climbed on the platform.

"Ready?" he asked.

I nodded, trying to look nonchalant. We were both nervous as cats. I sat down and watched his hand reach for the switch.

"Here you go."

The feeling of electric tension in the air became stronger and I felt weak and dizzy. Petey's face blurred . . .

I FELT as though I had been sitting there on the stone floor, half asleep, for hours. I was stiff and cold and couldn't remember where I was or how I got there. A dry, musty-smelling wind was blowing little particles of dust against my face. The dust was eddying across the floor in the grey half-light, blowing aimlessly about, dancing in miniature whirlwinds. A steady whispering and sighing filled the air. I felt foggy and confused.

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Suddenly my mind cleared and I remembered Petey and the beam. I had come through! A thrill of excitement shot through me and I jumped up, wide awake, and looked at my watch. Thirty seconds had passed since Petey had thrown the switch! And now I was in Potter's Hall of Awful Shadow!

First I checked the chalk marks that Potter had made on the floor and then looked around. The place was incredibly huge and incredibly old. The dust of centuries of disuse lay thick on everything. The great hall was flanked by columns of pillars carved in fantastic shapes that rose up into the midnight gloom where the ceiling should be. At one end a huge stone figure squatted, the figure of a monstrosity the like of which never has been seen in our world. Nothing could possibly describe the awful and malignant monster of stone that crouched there, glaring sightlessly out of its three stone eyes. It bore no resemblance to any creature that had ever lived or had ever been imagined. I shuddered and hoped I would never meet the living original.

What light there was filtered in through the end opposite the idol, a cold, grey light shut off partially by three rows of colossal pillars, staggered so that from where I stood I could not see beyond them.

There was no sign of the bats that Petey had talked about. The place looked as though it had been deserted for centuries. I walked towards the front of the hall, flashing my light on all sides, noticing the evidences of disrepair. There were broken bits of masonry on the floors and scars on the walls and pillars showed where time had chipped away the stones.

I went on between the pillars, stepped out on a stone terrace and had my first look at this strange and silent world.

A strange, pale sun shone down out of a hazy sky that seemed to be near to the ground, as though this world were imprisoned in a sphere. Before me were the ruins of a city of stone, cold, grey, seemingly empty. Massive, broken buildings surrounded me on all sides. A long flight of ruined stairs led down from the terrace on which I stood to a large open plaza. The powdery dust, eddying and drifting in the dry wind was the only thing that moved and nothing could be heard except the eternal whispering and sighing of the wind itself. I felt lost and lonely as I stood there in the pale light of this dead planet, wondering what had become of the people that had built these mighty ruins.

I turned and looked back and up at the huge edifice I had just left. It seemed to be a temple of some sort.

Ancient carvings that seemed to be obliterated by time were faintly traced on the walls and pillars. Some of these looked like symbols, carved writings of an unknown language. Others might have represented animals and plants. One symbol occurred several times and in places of prominence—three circles joined together like links of a chain.

I DESCENDED the stairs and walked across the great plaza, scuffling through the dust and rubble of a vanished race. I felt that if ever there was a haunted city, this was it. A feeling of doom and tragedy was all about me. Not a living thing was to be seen. Not a leaf or a blade of grass. No birds flew against the grey sky. And yet Petey had spoken of giant bats, and somewhere, alive or dead, Doc Potter couldn't be far away.

I hallooed at the top of my voice and fired three shots in the air. There was no answer, only the wind and the whispering, shifting dust. I went on

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towards the massive ruins facing the temple from which I had come. To my left and right I could look down broad, endless avenues, choked with debris and lined with the skeletons of more buildings. This city must have been huge. It would take a long time to search it, building by building, for one man. Petey and I couldn't do it alone. I would have to get help. It was time, I saw by my watch, to get back to the control zone. I turned toward the temple and stopped dead in my tracks. There were the bats!

They had drifted down so silently that I hadn't been aware of them. There must have been a dozen of them on the steps leading to the stone terrace, cutting me off from my world. More were drifting down on the wind, giant black wings outstretched. They swooped down, skimming along the surface of the ground, ran a few steps and stopped, folding their bony wings awkwardly. There was something menacing in their silent scrutiny that made my skin crawl. I looked cautiously around to judge the distance to the buildings in back of me. I wanted to get my back to a wall, but it was too late. Four or five of the creatures had already settled on the plaza behind me and several more were banking through the air, circling, coming in for a landing that would have me surrounded.

Potter had been partly right about them. They were bigger than eagles but not as big as barns. They were ugly looking brutes with bodies the size of a man's, ape-like hands and feet, small, grotesque heads and features . . . their features *did* seem human! A terrible and frightening caricature of the human face!

I sensed something else, too. This was not a haphazard arrival of a band of giant, bat-like mammals. They were there with a purpose, working according to plan, surrounding me deliberately. I felt they were communicating with each other somehow.

OUT of the corner of my eye I saw a slight movement. I turned in time to see three of them moving cautiously in on me. As soon as I looked at them they froze, their glittering little eyes never moving from my face. Now there was a faint shuffling behind me and I whirled around to see that several more had moved up on me. Then the whole pack of them were moving, drifting like smoke across the plaza, closing in.

I started to run straight for the temple and the control zone. I had only seconds to make it. The pack in front of me rose up, leathery wings beating the air to thunder. There was a rush behind me, and on all sides. I raised the gun and fired point-blank into a black, ape-like face in my path. There was a human scream, lingering and blood-curdling. The crash of the shot stopped them for a moment and I reached the stairs to the terrace, firing twice more to clear a path.

I hurdled two writhing, fallen monsters and was part way up the stairs when they closed in again with a high-pitched gabbling noise. I emptied the gun into the jam of bodies and thrashing wings in front of me and charged into them.

Strong monkey-like hands clutched at me, tried to trip me. I landed a beautiful right on an ugly face and had the satisfaction of feeling breaking bone. Then a pile of foul-smelling bodies and flailing wings pulled me down to my knees but I struggled up again and fought my way savagely on for ten more feet. I got two or three good haymakers in before they pulled me down again and then I felt needle-like teeth biting

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into my arms and legs.

Immediately a heavy, langorous feeling crept over me. My arms and feet were heavy as lead and my brain seemed unable to make them co-ordinate. "Poison," I thought, dully, but I was by now too stupefied to care. I just wanted to lie down and go to sleep. I could no longer see . . .

I lay on my back looking at the stone ceiling, feeling a rough stone floor under me, listening to the whispering wind. I lay there for some time, not caring to move, as memory flooded back into me. At any rate I was alive, I thought, as I cautiously moved a hand experimentally. I rolled my head around until the side of my face was against the floor. I was in a small, stone room.

In the wall behind me a circular opening admitted light from outdoors and in the wall I was now facing there was a circular door across which a heavy stone slab had been rolled. A man was sitting against the wall with his knees drawn up, looking moodily at the floor between his feet and idly drawing figures in the dust.

"Dr. Livingston, I presume?" I said.

He jumped up.

"I've been sitting here for two hours, waiting for a chance to say that to you. Oh well, it isn't very funny anyway. How do you feel?"

I sat up dizzily.

"I guess I'm all here. Where am I, as they always say in situations like this?"

"We are prisoners off the Bat King, held in the Tower of Silence in the heart of the City of Dreadful Doom. I don't know what They call it but They couldn't have a better name than that. By the way, I'm Potter, the Mad Hermit of Zodiac. Everybody seems to call me Doc, to my distress, so you might as well too. You must have been broadcast here by the good Petey in a laudable effort to rescue me." This guy is all right, I thought.

"Johnny Shipman," I said and we solemnly shook hands. "Now, what's your theory about all this? How do we get out of this place, the City of Dreadful Gloom?"

"Doom. Dreadful Doom. Oh, well, it doesn't go by that name among the natives. Look." He led me over to the circular window.

THERE were no bars in the window and I saw why. It must have been a sheer drop of three hundred feet to the debris-filled street below. The city's broken walls and roofs were spread before us, fading away into the drifting clouds of dust that must blow continuously over this dying planet. Great drifts of dust smothered many of the lower buildings in long, billowing dunes.

"Very pretty," I said, trying to match his easy nonchalance. "A place I'd like to settle right down in. Only not very much. What do you suppose those screwball flying gorillas are saving us for, a stew? But first, WHERE ARE WE?"

Doc Potter squinted out the window.

"Roughly, about three hundred feet above Thomas J. Lynch's Bar & Grill on Hudson Street. That's about as close as I can make it. Look over there. That's where we came through. Got a cigarette? Thanks. Been wanting one of these things for a long time now. Lucky those flying bombies didn't take anything from you. Or did they?

"One gun missing," I muttered, going through my clothes. "One flashlight. Some skin off my knuckles. I seem to have everything else, which wasn't much. Well, what's the next move? What are those monkeys planning to do

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with us—or don't you know?"

"I don't know but I imagine something pretty unpleasant," he answered cheerfully. "I have some theories about this place that I want to mull over, quietly. Right now the important thing is to get back to the control zone. Those bats aren't just going to leave us alone in here. They've got some pretty gruesome plans for our future and we'd better get out before they start putting them into effect. I think we can do it."

"Fine! How?"

"I've been studying the outside of this building. You'll notice there are wide cracks between the stones. The best thing to do would be to wait for night and then climb down the outside of the tower." He beamed on me pleasantly.

I stuck my head out the window again and shuddered.

"Let's hear the next-best plan. Those cracks don't look big enough to suit me. What's the routine around here, anyway? Do they feed us?"

"If you can call it feeding. It consists of some kind of dough-like cakes and some pretty foul water that one of the chore-boys brings around towards evening. It will keep you alive, if it doesn't kill you." He thought for a moment. "A bat-man comes through that door with water in a jug and those cakes. We might use the old sick-man technique on him. You lie on the ground, groaning and taking on, I bend over you. There are one or two more of them outside the door, sort of standing guard. They must want to keep us alive and in good shape or they would have killed us right off. At least they wouldn't be bothering to feed us. So when they see you are dying, apparently, they rush in to find out what's the matter. Then we leap up, taking them by surprise, overpower them and make good our escape! Simple?"

"No it isn't simple! Who do you think I am, Flash Gordon? I never had any practice overpowering regular gorillas, and these can fly to boot!"

"There's an escape like that in every adventure story that's ever been written and it works every time!" he said in an aggrieved voice.

"Maybe so, but I have a hunch these monkeys haven't read any adventure stories. Listen, Potter! All your plans involve climbing down the outside of buildings or overpowering twice our number of these things! Each one of them is stronger than I am and I haven't climbed down the outside of a building since I used to sneak out nights when I was a kid! High places always gave me the willies anyway."

HE SEEMED to actually be enjoying our predicament.

"Why, my boy, do you mean to say that a bunch of dirty, smelly flying apes can keep two free-born American citizens in captivity? We must outwit them!"

"How about getting in touch with the American consul?"

"In this case, impractical." All this time we had been going over the walls and floors and testing the strange, circular door. Potter went on, "I've been observing our flying friends and I've come to the conclusion that they're not real bright. They have two physical characteristics that we haven't; they can fly and their bite is mildly poisonous. It seems to work like an anaesthetic which wears off in a couple of hours."

"What about this city. If they could build all this they're surely bright enough to keep us prisoners if they want to."

"They didn't build it! I know that much. This city, these buildings,

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weren't meant for them. I had a chance to nose around a bit before they jumped me. They don't fit! For instance, there are benches that these bats can't sit on without breaking off their wings. And stairways! What would a race that can fly be doing with stairways? I've watched them coming through that door and they have to bend over to get their wings through. If they'd built it they would have made it bigger. On top of all that, I found some wall carvings that had regular human figures on them! They were pretty worn and chipped and there were only fragments but I know they didn't have wings. They didn't look like us, either, but they may have been stylized, like Egyptians carvings were, before the Christian era.

"My theory is that these bats are a much lower order of life than the original inhabitants. I also think they had something to do with the disappearance of the people. They're a vicious lot but they haven't any intelligence. We should be able to outsmart them."

"You say that one or two stand guard at the door and one comes in with food. What's outside the door?"

"I don't know. I was unconscious too when they brought me here. If my theory is right and this place was built for human beings there must be some way to get down. I wonder how that door locks? It's just a circular slab that rolls back into the wall."

Suddenly there was one of them in the room with us. It hadn't come in either the door or the window. It materialized before our eyes, just like that. Potter said, "Good God!" softly. I just stared. Where had it come from? It made no move toward us but stood with its leathery wings folded, staring at us with its glittering eyes. There seemed to be more concentrated evil in that unwinking scrutiny than anything I had ever seen!

"W-we *mustn't* let it see we're scared," Potter whispered. "Whatever it wants it is out to get it now. Keep a stiff upper lip!"

THE mad little eyes in that unholy face fixed themselves on mine. I stared right back at it. I tried to remember whether a human could outstare an animal or not. I don't know how long we stood there, unmoving, glaring at each other. As my mind grew numb I realized that I couldn't look away if I tried. Everything faded out but those eyes. I was alone in black space and they burned into me. My mind was being held, examined, emptied of every thought and memory. Then the eyes faded out and there was only blackness.

Once more I found myself lying on the stone floor. It was night outside and the room was thick with darkness in the corners, lightened only by a flickering gleam that came through the doorway. With a start I realized the door was open!

The bat-man and Potter were staring at each other silently. Potter was rigid and sweat was pouring down his face. I sat up slowly but neither noticed me and I saw they were both in a trance. Through the door I heard a scuffling noise and a dry rattle. Another bat-man was out there, maybe more. I got cautiously and silently to my feet.

A heavy, crude jug that seemed to be full of water had been placed on the floor of our cell. Moving as silently as the night I crept to it and picked it up slowly. It was a heavy but unwieldy weapon but it was the only one I could get. Potter and the bat-man still stood as though carved from stone.

The best attack is a surprise attack. Catch him off guard and the fight is half won. I came out the door running and

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swung the heavy jug with all my strength before he realized what was happening. He went over backwards, ugly wings thrashing futilely on the dusty stones. I jumped on him, landing with all my weight on his stomach with my knee. The breath went out of him with a loud whoosh and I smashed my fist into his misshapen head with everything I had. His skull cracked against the floor.

I looked up to see that he had been the only one in the room and, without waiting to find out whether he was out, I raced back into our cell. I collided with the other beauty, who had come out of his trance, in the doorway and we both went over in a mad tangle of flailing arms and wings. I got my hands on his throat and tried to smash his head against the stone floor but he was fighting savagely.

He was much stronger than I, though his wings seemed to handicap him. His ape's hands gripped my arms and legs with crushing force, tearing me loose. We rolled over and over.

I couldn't keep it up much longer. He tore one of my hands loose, then the other. His ugly face was getting closer, sharp yellow fangs bared. If he bit me once I was done for. But at this point he suddenly went rigid and then collapsed.

"I knew they were dumb! They never even took this knife away from me!" Doc said, pulling it out of the creature's neck. Must have found the right spot. Folded him up in a flash! You all right? We ought to be getting out of here."

I WAS gasping for breath painfully but I nodded and staggered to my feet, swaying dizzily. I was still staggering as we went into the next room, a circular chamber with a pointed ceiling, where the guard lay. The light came, I saw now, from a lamp on the floor that burned some kind of oil. It was smoky and flickering but we took it up and looked around us.

"Wait," Doc said and bending over the fallen bat-man he neatly and efficiently cut his throat. I felt sick as blood bubbled out and flowed unevenly on the floor.

"Best to make sure of him," Potter said. "Come on."

There were several circular exits in the room. We chose one at random and ran down a stone corridor that had an arched ceiling. Luck was still with us. We came to a circular staircase that wound down into the depths of the building. We started down cautiously.

We had gone perhaps fifty feet when the torch went out. We shook the little lamp but it was empty. The blackness closed in around us like a solid thing.

"Keep going," Potter whispered. "Feel each step before you put your weight on it. Save your matches for an emergency."

We felt our way, step by step, down that nightmare stair. From time to time we paused, listening for sounds of pursuit. Then we went on again. They seemed interminable. Sometimes we felt a draught of musty air and knew we were passing the entrance to one of the floors. At one of these we stopped and I lit one of my precious matches. The feeble light showed only a patch of floor littered with the crumbling remnants of what may have been furniture. Beyond was blackness and the smell of death. We went on down.

Suddenly I stopped, frozen.

"Listen, Potter! Something's coming up!" We held our breaths and stood tensely. Far below us in the black, winding tube we heard the faint shuffle of bare feet on stone! The

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noise came nearer and nearer. There was a faint rustle and click behind me as Potter opened his knife. Now the steps were almost on us.

Instinctively we flattened against the outer wall though the space was so narrow that nothing could get by us without touching. I struck a match but the matchstick snapped in two and the head spun off into the blackness after only a few sparks had fizzed weakly for a fraction of a second.

Before I could get another match the steps went by us with a rush, seemingly right over our heads, and died away in the blackness above. Potter let out his breath in a long, shaky sigh.

"What next?" I whispered. "Now we have things that walk on the ceiling!"

"Come on, let's get out of here! I don't know what that was and I don't want to know! I've seen enough to keep me in bad dreams the rest of my life!"

We went on some more. When it seemed that I had spent a lifetime in those endless stairs I asked.

"How far do you think we've come?"

"Five hundred and thirty-two steps. We should be almost down. When we get to . . . oh my golly, here it comes again!"

THERE was a rush of footsteps pattering down the stairs behind us and we could hear a faint gibbering and squeaking.

"That doesn't sound like the batmen!" Potter muttered nervously.

"Whatever it is, I'm taking a poke at it! I can't stand much more of this scurry, scurry, scurry! Let me by!" I braced myself and as the footsteps were almost on top of me I swung hard. My fist swished through empty air and I fell off-balance against Potter, who yelled, "Help! They got me!"

"Quiet! It's me!" The footsteps and squeaking stopped. We listened, holding our breaths again, but there was no more noise.

Once more we started down. After a bit Potter touched my shoulder.

"Six hundred steps! We should be near ground-level now. Look for an exit." I put a hand on either wall and went on. Soon my left hand came to a break and simultaneously I saw a broken rectangle of pale light at some distance from me.

"This ought to be it," I said softly. I had the feeling that the stairs went on down but we stumbled out on a level floor and made our way towards the light.

We stepped out cautiously into a litter-filled street. A small, pale moon lit the ruined city. There was no sign of any life.

Our spirits rose, now that we were out of the close, dark stair-well.

"This way," Doc whispered, and we ran off through the thick dust, dodging huge stones that had fallen from the buildings, keeping always in the blackest shadows.

We didn't have far to go. We rounded a corner into the plaza and stopped in dismay. The temple steps and the terrace were black with figures. We looked around frantically for a place to hide and finally saw a small, black opening in the wall behind us. We squeezed through.

Doc looked cautiously out at the plaza.

"I don't think they saw us. Maybe they'll go away and we can make a run for it. Oh, when will we see Petey's honest face again?"

"Now where do you suppose we've ended up this time?" I muttered bit-

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terly, trying to see into the thick, dusty gloom.

"This is the Temple of Vengeance!" he said, darkly. "Here is the place where human sacrifices are made to the dreaded Hooded Ones!"

"Listen, Potter! Do you always have to think up such creepy names? Why can't this be the Hall of Happy Laughter and Fun? Things are bad enough as they are!"

"Hist, comrade! We are in deadly peril! Even now the Hooded Ones are all about us . . . Oh my God, they really are!"

We heard again the patter of feet and a faint gibbering! It was close, all around us! I hastily struck one of my last matches.

There was a circle of pale faces in the flickering light. Human faces!

THERE were eight or nine of them, short, fragile-looking, the color of the dust from which they seemed to have risen. Queer, ragged garments partially covered their slender bodies. The match wavered and went out, leaving me with the impression that these poor shadows of humanity were no menace to us. They even seemed to be friendly. Their squeaky voices came softly through the darkness and hands tugged at me gently.

"They want us to come with them," I called to Potter. "Don't try to fight them. I think they're friendly."

We were led through pitch blackness over an uneven floor for a short distance. There was a rumbling noise and a stone doorway rolled back, letting in a little light. They took us into a long passageway that sloped down into the ground, lit by more of those flickering little oil lamps in niches along the wall.

The stone doorway rumbled shut behind us. Two of the little people scuttled ahead of us down the passageway and the rest indicated that we should wait where we were. We sat down wearily in the dust and the others grouped themselves at a short distance away, squeaking among themselves and seeming to regard us reverently.

Potter was looking around with interest.

"You know," he said, "I think these are the original natives, or what's left of them. The bat-men got the upper hand in some way and must have wiped out most of the human race. Here and there little colonies of refugees like this one have survived and are hiding out underground."

"How could they hide out from creatures that can go right through stone walls and appear out of nowhere?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Maybe these people can do just as well. They must have some defense from them and some places where they are safe. That bat-man who hypnotized us was reading our minds in some way. Trying to get information from us. It's got me stumped."

"And you said they aren't bright! They can appear and disappear at will, hypnotize people and read their minds! What does anybody have to do to qualify for 'bright' with you?"

"I *still* claim they aren't bright! I'll admit they can do things that seem astounding to us, but then they turn around and do something so stupid that it seems a six-year-old boy could outsmart them! Like leaving me with a knife. Look how we got away from two of them! My theory is that these little people and the bat-men are the decadent remnants of two races that at one time were very advanced. From the looks of things they must have fought it out almost to the last man.

"Now, you take those bat-men.

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They have powers that are purely physical, even to their ability to disappear. It's probably a power that we ourselves have, only we have never learned to develop it. The same thing with their hypnotizing and mind-reading. We are just beginning to learn about those things! To the bat-men they're as natural as breathing and walking are to us! But the difference between us and the bat-men is that they have lost the ability to reason whereas we can reason like all get-out, so we can outsmart them every time! In other words, to sum up my fine, five-dollar theory, they don't know how to use their powers to their best advantage. Haven't got the brains to."

TWO little people scuttled up the passageway and there was renewed squealing and excitement. They motioned us respectfully to come with them and we went down the corridor for a long way. At the end of it another door was rolled back and we entered a large room where a crowd of the little people seemed to be expecting us. They were a sorry looking lot but it was evident that our arrival was causing a lot of excitement. They swarmed around us, trying to touch us, and there was a clamor of squeaky voices. We must have seemed like giants or gods to them, towering above them by over two feet.

An old man, who seemed to be the chief, pushed the people back a little and then made a long, reverent speech. At the conclusion Potter recited Lin-

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coln's Gettysburg Address with a great deal of solemn feeling and then he seized the chief's right hand and shook it gravely. The effect was tremendous. They actually cheered.

After we had eaten some queer, tasteless food and had some brackish water to drink we sat down with the chief and a group of the elders and tried to converse. We got over that we were from another world, that our world was full of people like ourselves, that we had big cities and could fly through the air, converse with each other at great distances and, in short, had a pretty snappy civilization. They nodded eagerly, as though our story was confirming something they already suspected.

Then the chief and the elders, with great dignity, ushered us into another underground room, a vast hall.

"Softly, comrade!" whispered Potter, "We enter the Holy of Holies!"

Indeed, they all showed the utmost reverence for the place. The walls were covered with carved figures and there were statues and what seemed to be models arranged neatly around the room on pedestals and in cases. Everything was kept clean and free of the dust that had penetrated everywhere else.

We were taken ceremoniously to a life-sized figure of a man seated on an elaborately carved throne. It was a wonderful piece of work, ancient as the crumbling city itself but so beautifully carved that it seemed to breathe life. A vigorous, intelligent face on a powerful body. The chief was telling us about this statue and as his squeaky, ineffectual voice droned on I couldn't help comparing the statue of the Ancient with his degenerate descendant. They must have been a magnificent race in their prime.

This hall contained the history of their race and a few relics of their great civilization. On one pedestal was a gleaming model of what must have been a great air-liner; seven decks of stainless steel and glittering glass windows. On another was an actual single-seat flyer, a battered but beautifully-streamlined, wingless dragonfly with tarnished controls and the remnants of upholstery on its single, bucket-shaped seat. Down the center of the hall, on a long table, was a model of this city as it had been in its glorious past, with broad, green boulevards and hanging gardens and terraces bright with colored awnings.

One scene painted on the wall was interesting. It showed a great gathering of some queer people, not the bat-men, apparently witnessing an execution, or some sort of ceremonial torture. A human figure, a female, was imprisoned in a sort of glass cabinet, which had access to another enclosure which housed some mighty horrible looking insects. I guessed what would happen when the gates between the enclosures were opened! I shuddered.

But smashing through a great cliff wall behind, was the most tremendous drilling machine I had ever seen. Man, the science of this ancient world! It must have been terrific. I had no opportunity to spend time conjecturing as to what kind of a war machine it might have been.

POTTER had been examining the wall-carvings and now he called me over.

"Here's the history of these people, if we can make it out. Look, here they are, building this city. And here are the bat-men! They used them as slaves or laborers. So that's what happened! The slaves revolted."

The chief seemed to know what we

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were doing. He led us to one corner of the room and pointed.

"I think he means that the history starts here," I said. "It's like a tapestry in stone. This is all allegorical stuff. Birth in Fire and Water." I traced the ancient carvings with my finger. "Creation of the world. Only they have three worlds. What do you suppose . . . ?"

The chief squeaked excitedly and held up three fingers, pointing to the three worlds that were carved in such a way that they looked superimposed on each other. We both saw it once.

"Why, he means that there really *are* three worlds! Ours and his and . . ."

Catching our eye again, the chief pointed to the right-hand world and then to us. Then he pointed to the center world and indicated himself and the elders. When he came to the left-hand world he flapped his arms in imitation of flying.

"The b a t s ! '' Potter exclaimed. "They came from another planet that is around us too! So that's where they appear from! They must be able to commute between the two!"

"He seems to know about our world, too. I wonder if the bats do."

We walked along, studying the stone tapestry. The chief led us along, pointing to incidents in the sculptured history. There were battles between the peoples of this planet and then peace. The land bloomed like a garden and great cities rose, linked by giant airliners, like the model on the pedestal. Then came the bat-men, first as slaves and then as enemies.

We noticed a curious thing, over and over. Through it all, the men and women who died or were killed were represented as passing through to our world—the one we had left.

We puzzled over this for a long time.

"Do you suppose our world is a heaven to these people?" Doc mused. "Do they, when they die, reach the next plane of life and get born again on our planet?"

"There's trouble in Heaven, if that's true," I said. "I'd hate to have to tell them of the mess they're going to get into. How do you explain the civilization that was superior to ours, if we're supposed to be on a higher plane?"

"I don't explain it. I want to go home and wrap a cold towel around my head and give it a lot more thought. But, you know, there are inherited racial memories in us that we have never explained. Fear of bats is one. Why should we always think of our little bats as evil creatures? Why are imps of Satan always pictured as semi-human creatures with bat wings? The battle of the humans and the bat-men here may have survived in our memories and taken the form of myths about the fallen angels and the nether-regions." He was silent for awhile.

"YOU know, there may be other worlds beyond ours. There are plenty of stories about them. Every religion has its Heaven, just as our world seems to be a Heaven to our little cousins, here. Perhaps this is where we all started. We may be one step nearer to solving the mystery of life!"

"If you're right," I said, "The bat-man was trying to learn the secret of getting to our world! Good lord, you don't think he was able to do it, to find out about your atom re-arranger, when you were under? Those beauties might get through to us and go to work on us!"

"That's what they were after. I rather sensed it. However, they think

(*Continued on third cover*)

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VOICE FROM THE VOID

by HARL VINCENT

Deadly ships from Venus were on their trail, and Wally Martin mooned over a girl's voice!

"DID you hear that?" Wally Martin asked me, goofy-like.

"Hear what?" I replied, keeping an eye on the vision screen full of pursuit jobs in our wake. "Your report?"

"No," Wally sort of yodeled. *"Her* voice. Ever hear anything like it? Every word a song—"

It must be I was staring at him with my jaw hanging or something because Wally broke off and looked kind of sheepish.

"Voice!" I yammered. "You're thinking about a voice when the whole of space is full of Venies after our scalps. Whose voice?"

"Hers. The operator's," mooned Wally.

It seemed then I could recall the rich throaty tones of it and the almost caressing way it had come through the

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sound grid. No vision flash, of course; central operators weren't allowed to put their mugs on the vision wave. But to go daffy over a voice!

"Wally," I said, severe like, "you must be going nuts, which is no wonder after knocking off a couple of hundred Venies and a billion in war supplies. With all the swell femmes you've turned down, to go and fall for a voice. The laughing academy for you, buddy."

But Wally only stared into space with that half smile around his lips and said nothing. I could see he was hit hard.

For me to tell you Wally Martin was a lady-killer would be giving you a wrong slant. What I mean is he never went for that stuff at all, whether in the big burgs of Terra where they sort of stood around and bugged longing eyes at him or in the pleasure cities of Mars where even the top-notch hostesses went for him in a big way, giving it up as a bad job only after desperate use of their best glamor tactics. It was just that Wally was that kind of a big he-man good-looker they all fell for. But he wouldn't give any of them a tumble.

And me, with my honest but ugly pan, itching all the time for just one of the classy dames to hand me as much as a how-do-you-do. That's the way it is with me and the other way with Wally.

Which made it all the tougher, what finally happened to him. Wally had to learn the hard way.

It was after the two of us had raided the Venusian base at Lin-Tarig and had their whole damn space navy on our tail. I was shoving our little atomic blaster toward her Terra base with everything she had when Wally made the etherphone call to G.H.Q. To report what we'd done, of course. And this voice was from a central operator who got the connection through for him.

WALLY'S smile faded when our thinly screened blaster shivered to a heavy jolt. One of the Venies had gotten a shot through. So I locked the controls in automatic with five gravities acceleration and the two of us lurched astern, hanging onto everything in sight.

The alarm board showed that one of our spare atmosphere units had been put out of commission and its compartment sealed off. So far not bad. Wally and I climbed up to the stern gun turret in a rush.

Two of the swifter Venies were back there, just within range, and were blasting away at us wildly.

"Let me at those sights," growled Wally. "This is my meat."

It was his meat; he was a much better shot than I. So I let him take it, though itching to have a flyer at those birds myself. Meanwhile, I remote-controlled the spare generator and brought it up to speed, switching the extra power into our stern screens. The Venie's blasts were splattering harmlessly against the unseen barrier after that, bright flashes against the black of the void.

Wally grunted when he let fly with his fist. Then: "A hit, Eustace!" he whooped.

Yes, my name's Eustace. Eustace Cunningham, which doesn't fit my fighting pan at all. But, could I help what they tagged me? Anyway, Wally was right; it was a hit. One of the Venies splashed out into a beautiful sunburst of light and then was gone. The other started a wide arc in space, whether to take a new firing position or to try and get away I'll never tell you. Whatever its pilot's idea, he was goofy and didn't know anything about Wally's marksmanship. Because the sec-

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ond blast caught him amidships and he just went "poof" like the first one. The rest of the Venies were too far astern to worry about, so we went back to the control room.

"That means I'll have to report again to G.H.Q.," gloated Wally, diving for the etherphone.

He couldn't kid me of course; I knew why he was so anxious to call. And it was kind of sad, seeing him this way, nuts about a voice. But this was only the beginning! I didn't know anything yet.

SURE enough, the same dame answered his flicker. And she did have a voice you'd remember, sort of cooing-like and cultured like a top-notch actress. I listened close this time and got a kick out of it myself. Even before she sprung the surprise.

"Congratulations," were her first words on plugging in, "on the way you took over those enemy ships."

That gave Wally a jolt. Me too.

"Why—why," he stammered, "how did you know about it?"

You could almost hear that gal blushing. "I had a spy beam on you," she admitted. "I saw the battle."

"Well, fry my hide," said Wally. "So your supervisor wasn't around. And, if that's so, what do you say you give me a vision flash of yourself?"

"No, no; I couldn't do that. Really I couldn't." The voice from the void was obviously agitated. "You know it's a strict rule always, especially since the war."

"So are the spy beams forbidden to you," countered Wally.

"Uh—well, that's different." The voice seemed panicky to me but I could tell by the calf eyes my buddy was making that he still thought it was the swellest voice he'd ever heard.

"Maybe you'll tell me your name then," he volunteered. "Mine's Wally Martin."

"Oh I know your name." That voice blushed again, sure as I'm a space wrangler. "Mine is Elsa Vaughn. There, now I've told you. It is G.H.Q. you wanted again?"

"Yes but wait; I want to talk to you," jabbered Wally.

"Can't do it—Wally. I—" To me, that rich voice was once more panicky. The girl seemed sorry she'd told him what she had. Scared of something, that dame. "Here's your connection."

Old Tompkins's fat jowls faded into the vision screen then and Wally started to sputter out his report to the top hat at G.H.Q.

"Get yourself together and start all over," the old boy told him after a few cockeyed words.

And then Wally got hold of himself and told about the dog fight we'd just had. After old Tompkins gave us the "good boys" line and clicked off, this loony pal of mine tried for a half an hour to raise that voice again. Finally he did get the supervisor at the Terra Central and was told to keep off the ether if he had no G.H.Q. calls to make. Regulations, she said primly. And of course the love-sick galoot didn't have nerve to ask where was Elsa Vaughn. He'd have been a genuine crackpot if he had.

"Damn!" he swore feelingly and went off grumpily to his bunk.

WE'D been ordered in to Terra base, which was at a Long Island port I can't tell you about, and Wally had the jim-jams all the way in. It was three days run from that last dog-fight and wasn't a damn bit funny to me. The guy would hardly talk and when he did you couldn't help but know he was somewhere else with his thoughts. Where?—I'll give you three guesses.

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Finally the indicators warned us we were getting close to the Heaviside Layer and I plugged in the search ray swarm on the radio telescope and took a look-see ahead. After a while I spotted, big as life, four Venie blasters streaking in from God knows where.

"Hey, Wally!" I yelped, "take a gander at this."

He eyed the disc and it looked as if he'd forgotten her voice, at least for the time. "At 'em, Yoost!" he whooped and was up the companionway for the forward gun turret.

Yoost—how do you like that? This moniker of mine is one you can't even nickname decently.

Anyway, I gave our ship the gun and went driving for those four Venies, knowing my buddy was handling the persuader up top. But the sly Venies split up into two pairs, one pair coming in to meet us and the other pair circling to take us from the stern.

Wally's voice bellowed out of the intercom speaker: "Put her in automatic, full acceleration and get up there to the aft turret. And don't miss, fellow."

So I did what he said and scrammed, muttering some kind of a prayer that I'd be able to see those sights and keep my hands from shaking. This was it!

Those devils were really after us this time, what I mean. I switched all the reserve power we had into the screens and threw them out as far fore and aft as I dared. And then those two were closing in to get the range on our stern. I couldn't see what my pal was doing in the forward turret but knew I could depend on him to get his two. How about me?

My first blast missed a mile and a big splash tore through the screen out there and almost reached me where I sat. Or did I sit? I guess I was jumping around in that little cubby like a monkey.

The Venies poured their stuff in after me then and I was sending it back at them just as fast as I could. But their screens and ours were holding out pretty well at this range and they couldn't seem to gain enough on us to get in closer. So neither side could score.

"Got one of mine!" Wally yelped through the intercom. "How're you doing, Cunning?"

Another of those nicknames that give me a pain. I told him I wasn't doing so good but it wasn't my fault.

And just then one of those damn Venies put on a burst of speed and plunked us so hard it knocked me off the gun seat. There was a keening wail below as a generator let loose and then the clatter of a million pieces smacking the steel bulkheads. The panel light for number seven spare blinked out and the Venies began to get through plenty as the stern screens weakened. The generator compartment held, though, and the Venies were missing in their excitement.

"Give it to 'em!" screeched Wally. "Quick; we're near the Heaviside."

I'D FORGOTTEN about that. You never know what that queer layer of pounding electrical forces is going to do to you when you dive through. The pinch we were in must have steadied my eye and my mitt, because my next shot blew the nearer Venie to kingdom come.

So it was my turn to whoop. "Got one, Wally!"

"Attaboy!"

Then we began to roll and go jittery like a guy with the horrors coming on. You couldn't hit a flock of barns with the blasters. I scrambled down to the control room and nosed into the layer at the proper angle.

And Wally corked off his second Venie just as I got the ship straightened away. He came roaring through the control room toward the stern gun.

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"Hold her as steady as you can," he told me.

Just like that. Well, if you think it's easy just try it once yourself. We took one corking beating for the next few minutes and I had all I could do to keep us in one piece, let alone holding to a steady course.

But Wally got the last Venie while we were still in the grip of old Heaviside, so we were all right. Or were we?

The alarm panel was ringing all over the place and I couldn't count the red lights that blinked on. One of our bulkheads had sprung a leak for one thing. Half our air apparatus had conked off for another. And our keel rocket ignition was completely haywire. How the hell to land?

"Some fun," commented Wally, coming in and regarding the alarm panel with his fists on his hips. "Some fun."

GRAVITY was tugging like the devil and I flattened off and took a swooping spiral around Terra, decelerating full five gravities, which was all we could stand. Wally went below to see what he could do with the ignition down there.

When I sighted Long Island we were still doing a couple thousand miles an hour, so I circled way out to sea with the nose rockets still roaring full blast. I called frantically for a couple of rescue tugs to bring us in and, as I crossed the island again, saw a swarm of them coming up. But we weren't down to anything like landing speed yet and were losing altitude rapidly. Those tug wranglers simply couldn't catch up with us.

So we crashed about five miles from Base and that's the last I remembered till I woke up in the hospital.

"How's Wally?" I asked the nurse who had soft fingers on my pulse and was looking at her wrist watch.

After the time was up she wrote a figure on a chart and said brightly, "Well, you are all right outside of a goose egg on that thick skull of yours. I'll find out about your buddy. And you can get up if you're not too dizzy." She skittered out then.

You can't kill an old wrangler like me. I got out of that nice white bed and I was a little rocky on my pins. But I made it to the closet and all that was hanging there was a frilly bath robe. They had my clothes in the fumigator, I guess. Anyway, I put on the silly robe and sat around waiting for the nurse.

It got me nervous after a while and I was just going to take a stroll for myself whether they liked it or not when in breezed old Tompkins, from G.H.Q., and a doctor who looked more like an undertaker.

"You all right, Cunningham?" the top hat asked.

"Sure, I'm okay. But how's Wally?"

Tompkins looked grave and the doc dropped his eyes. "He's in bad shape, my boy," said the top hat. "One of the landing rockets exploded right in his face and he was badly burned. Beside broken bones mostly all over his body. But we *hope* he'll recover."

This was one for the book. I sat down hard on the steel chair to think this over. They couldn't do this to Wally, not to my pal.

"How good are his chances, Doc?" I asked. "Honestly now."

"I'd say about one in five," was the solemn answer.

"Holy Mackerel! Can I do anything? A transfusion or anything?" It just wasn't right that I was sitting here about as good as new and Wally was—like that.

"No, there's nothing you can do," said the long-faced doc.

"Well, can I see him?"

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"He's still unconscious and he's all wrapped up in bandages, so it would do you no good. Better get along home and come back here tomorrow. We may be able to let you see him then."

Old Tompkins gave me ten days furlough and told me there was a bonus waiting for me at Base. But what good was that with Wally in this shape?

They went out and the nurse came in and handed me my clothes. I must have put them on, though I don't remember doing it, because there I was dressed pretty soon. So I wandered out in the hall and got checked out by another pretty who sat in white starched uniform at a desk.

"There was a phone call for you," said this little de-icer.

"A phone call!" Who'd be calling me?

"It was a Miss Vaughn," the nurse was explaining. "She tried to get Wallace Martin first and then left her number for you to call when I told her he couldn't be communicated with."

"Thanks, Baby," I told the nurse and she gave me a dirty look that sent me off to the corner drug store fast.

So I called up Elsa Vaughn.

"HELLO," came that swell voice over the wire. I say it was swell and it was, but I could just feel the fear it carried. "Oh, Mr. Cunningham, I know you'll tell me the truth. You can't find out anything from the hospital. How is Wal—Mr. Martin?"

"Why, they didn't tell me so very much either," I told her, "but it's got me sort of worried. He was burned badly for one thing and has a lot of broken bones too. He won't be up and around for a while."

I didn't want to tell the poor kid how bad I really thought he was and how black the sawbones had painted it.

"Oh dear," wailed the voice, "I wish I could do something. I'm all upset and just have to talk to somebody. I—"

"Can't I come and see you?" I asked her, curious to know if she was as beautiful as her voice. And maybe she wouldn't think I was so bad myself; you never can tell about these operators.

"No—oh, no." The voice was panicky once more. "No, I can't see anybody."

"Say," I objected, "what's wrong? I'm W-lly's pal and I know from what happened that you're interested in him. And I'll tell you right now he's nuts about you without ever seeing you. Why should I want to get fresh?"

"It—it isn't that." The voice trailed off and was silent for a minute. Then: "All right. I might as well see you. Then you'll know. And you'll know why I never can see Wally; why he'll have to forget me when he's well again."

How do you like that? The whole thing looked screwy to me. This dame wasn't on the up and up or something. Maybe she was a married gal already.

She was giving me her address and I had a job writing it down on an old envelope in the dark booth. But I told her I'd be right over, so I went away from there.

The antigrav cab I grabbed whirled me the length of the island and into Queens in nothing flat, planting me right on the landing roof of a good class apartment building. I didn't have much of a time finding 36-T, which was her apartment.

And did I get a jolt when a slim little femme with a thick black veil over her puss met me at the door.

"Miss Vaughn?" I asked, as calm as possible with the mourning effect staring at me.

"Yes; come in, Mr. Cunningham," said the golden voice from back of the veil.

It made me feel spooky. In a kind of

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a daze, I followed her as she indicated one of those low down deep arm chairs into which I plunked thinking I'd never be able to get out of it. She sat down across from me, still with that black thing hiding her.

"Why the make-up?" I asked to start the ball rolling.

"This is the way I always have to appear in public and this is why I can never see or know Wally Martin," she said sadly. Then she swept the veil and said, "Look at me."

I looked. And, if I never leave ground again, she bore the slave mark of Mercury! The lower half of her face was as green as that stuff they call grass that grows between the cities.

TEARS trembled on the longest lashes I ever saw on the swellest big blue eyes in the world. The gal's features were perfect, her figure was perfect, and she'd have been a dream if it weren't for that damn mark of the tyrant of the inner planet.

She threw her head back proudly. "It's the mark of disgrace and it's there to stay, but I'm not—I wasn't—"

"I believe you," I said. "Forget it."

"I'll not forget it; I can't," she retorted. "I was captured and I was marked for his slave harem. But I escaped and finally got to a rescue ship without—"

"Forget it," I said. She was making me nervous. Hell, you couldn't help but believe this girl. She was every inch a lady, every inch a queen. "And I don't think it'd make any difference with Wally, knowing him as I do," I told her. And I meant it.

"Maybe not," she agreed, "not personally. But don't you see I could never be anything to him. Never marry him, even if he wanted me. I can never marry any man; I'd be too much of a drawback. Any man who'd be willing to take me would be cut off from all of his friends, from his old life entirely. He'd have to go into ignominious hiding with me. It's just impossible. But I do—I do think a great deal of Wally. I've watched and watched him when he didn't know."

The rich red lips were trembling and the tears were frankly oozing now. "Why, you poor kid!" I had to say. "You poor kid."

"Don't pity me," she begged, drying her tears. "I hate to be pitied."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," I said, getting an idea that I hated to think of myself. "Wally's been badly burned about his face, the doc tells me. He's all bandaged up now. Suppose now he should be—marked. Would that make any difference?"

A flash of hope made those big eyes two blue stars. "Why, why, it might." Then the glad light died out. "Oh, but that can't happen to Wally. It *can't*. The surgeons do such marvelous things now. He'll be all right."

I wished then that I thought he would. Of course I couldn't believe Wally wouldn't get well but I had an awful feeling about him in the middle of me. And here this girl was bursting her heart for him. I felt damn useless all of a sudden and got out of that deep chair a lot easier than I'd ever have believed.

"Well, I guess I'll have to leave, Miss Vaughn," I drooled, feeling helpless as a rabbit all of a sudden. "But I'll call you first thing tomorrow when I find out how he's coming. All right?"

"That's fine of you," she said, dropping her veil again. "I work tonight but will be in any time after eight in the morning."

And that's the way we left things.

THEY called me from the hospital before six next morning, asking me

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to get there as soon as I could. Scared as a Venusian deserter, I beat it for there as fast as ever I moved.

Wally was in delirium and was calling for Elsa, they told me. Who was Elsa? Where could they locate her? Wally was dying, but there was a chance he might pull through if only they could get her to his bedside. It might renew his will to live, they believed.

So I went in and sat by him and listened to the poor guy call for her, sick at the stomach myself and chewing my nails until eight o'clock when I could call the gal. He even began moaning for me to bring her to him. Me! Bless him; even in the fevered mind he relied on his old buddy. And me worrying how the hell this was going to work out, worrying about him getting well at all and about what would happen when and if he did.

Elsa Vaughn answered her phone at eight on the dot and I spilled her the news. She was crying when I finished.

"You say his eyes are bandaged and have to stay that way for a few days?" she sobbed. "He can't see me?"

"That's right," I gulped, almost as sorry for her as for Wally.

"I'll come out then," she resolved. "At least I can do that for him."

So she came and she took my place at Wally's side and she held his hand and talked with him in that soothing voice until she had him in his right mind again. And the doctors and the nurses, tip-toeing in and out, shook their heads and marveled at the miracle that was taking place before their eyes. It took about three hours until he drifted off into a natural sleep and Elsa Vaughn glided out at the doc's beckoning. I sneaked a look at Wally's chart and saw his temperature was down from a high of 104.2 to just a little over a hundred. How do you like that?

The girl told her story to the doc and he promised that her secret would be kept from the patient. She agreed when he asked her to come every day while the bandages were over his eyes but would go no further. There was a kind look to the doc's sour mug that made me like him better.

I saw Elsa Vaughn home after that, proud as hell of her on the way, veil or no veil.

SHE kept her word and spent more and more time at Wally's side. I don't know when the girl ever got any sleep, working nights and being there days.

And the way Wally made love to her was something to see. It made me get up and out most of the time, especially when he'd stroke her hair and eyes and run his fingers over her face saying over and over, "You're beautiful, beautiful. I can't wait till I can see you, dear." The girl would have to wipe away her tears as fast as they'd start running down her cheeks so he couldn't feel them. And that was just too much for an old hard-bitten cuss like me.

After about eight days the doc said he was going to unbandage Wally's face, so Elsa and I waited in the lounge for word from inside. When it came it was another jolt. A tough one.

The doc looked like an undertaker again. "He's blind," he told us. "Not marked, but totally blind."

Then Elsa Vaughn did break down. And I had to take a stroll again while the nurse tried to get her feeling better. I can see a guy get blown to bits—if he isn't a buddy—without batting an eye, but damned if I can stand a femme turning on the weeps. When they're real—like these were. But I was soon back with Elsa.

She quit crying quick-like and a shine came into those big eyes. "I can; I will," she exulted. "Oh, don't you

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see?—it's my chance. I'll marry him and love him and be his eyes. I'll see for him and do for him and he'll never know about my—about how I look."

There was a girl. She bounced into Wally's room and spilled the good news to him, laughing and crying in turn. Baring her heart and soul to the guy and him turning his head away from her caresses and words. It was no good.

Why? Because Wally wouldn't listen to making himself a burden to anyone, especially a beautiful young girl. No, he'd spend the rest of his useless life in a veteran's hospital dreaming of what might have been. Go away, Elsa—forget. Beat it, Yoost. His bitterness got to me, what I mean.

The girl just stood there with a look in her eyes like a kicked dog. Her chin quivered.

"I suppose I was a fool," she whispered, "to hope even that." She bent down swiftly then and kissed the poor guy on the corner of his mouth you could see.

"Go, please," he choked, "before I go completely nuts. Both of you."

With a tearing little sob, the girl turned and reeled blindly out of the door as if she hardly had strength to make it.

I stood there like a dumb ox for a minute and even the pretty nurse's melting looks didn't register with me at all.

"Scram, Yoost," said Wally. "I know you're there and I want to be alone. I mean it, boy."

So there was nothing to do but beat it.

THEN was when I started going haywire. I was disgusted with life and suddenly mad clear through. Why in hell did things like this have to happen to prefectly swell folks like Wally and Elsa, to two kids who were so much in love and who could have been so damn happy together if things had been different? I was going to do something about it, so help me.

My first stop was G.H.Q. and I barged into Tompkins' office, knocking over chairs and things like a bull in a china shop. The top hat stiffened when he saw me but I didn't even salute, I was so riled up.

"Has any other doc examined Wally's eyes?" I demanded.

Tompkins forgot to be sore at me. "Eyes?" he asked.

"Don't you know the guy's blind?" I yowled. "They saved him from a badly scarred mug but let him lose his sight. My buddy!"

Tompkins actually paled. "Why, I didn't know," he sort of apologized. And he reached for the phone. "Get me the hospital," he told his secretary.

In a minute he was shooting rapid-fire questions at the doc and was looking graver and graver at the answers he was getting. When he hung up he was as gloomy as the doc himself.

"There's no chance for him," he sighed heavily. His beefy face was still white and his jowls twitched with emotion. "The only man in the solar system who could possibly restore his sight isn't available."

"Who's that?" I demanded. "And why isn't he available?"

They may have called me Eustace but that didn't keep me from inheriting the nerve of a Mercurian fire-lizard.

"The only man is Dr. Goodspeed, the famous eye surgeon, and he's in the Martian drylands, dying of T.B."

I do get an idea once in a while. "Hell," I said, "what's to hinder one of his associates here doing it under instructions by etherphone? It's been done before — other kinds of operations."

Tompkins' color returned and his heels clattered to the floor, giving me the jumps. "By George, maybe you've

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got something there," he admitted.

And then he got going like a house on fire. I never saw the top hat move so fast and didn't think it was in him. He just about dragged me with him as he made a bee line for the hospital. And there he had the whole staff running around like maniacs in no time at all.

They wheeled more apparatus into Wally's room than is in the central automatic relay room of a space liner. Doctors began arriving from all over the map. And they soon had Doc Goodspeed on the etherphone. He didn't look so bad to me; the drylands were doing him a lot of good, you could see that.

Wally got kind of excited at all the commotion and was worse when they began shining lights into his sightless eyes. Told them they were burning out his lamps. So they gave him a shot in the arm that put him sleepy-bye.

Well, to make a long story short, this Goodspeed examined his eyes inside out — through forty million miles of space—deciding the job could be done by using a special technique of his own. A Dr. Holcomb, who, the nurses told me was the best eye man outside of Goodspeed himself in the solar system, was picked to do the actual work. And an appointment was made for a full hour etherphone connection at ten that same night. They'd operate then, long distance. Which made me wonder if Elsa Vaughn would be at Central to clear the important connection. I'd give her a ring anyway and give her the good news.

So I had to go away from there to a phone booth and let myself in for a lot more grief.

ELSA was home all right and cried some more when I told her what was going on. But she'd made up her mind to leave Terra and just go out of Wally's life for keeps. She was happy as the devil over what the doctors had said but more than ever sure she had no chance at all with Wally. The ailment she had was more a disgrace than anything else and a disfigurement besides. The doctors couldn't do anything for her. No one could do anything. So she had quit her job and was packing. Yes, she'd stay around until she heard the result of the operation but there was no use of me trying to see her or to persuade her to remain and try again. I knew she meant it, too, when she finally hung up.

How do you like that? I was so upset and muddled I didn't know what to do with the hours that were left until ten that night. So I went down to the shore and looked up the old Martian quarter where I knew I could get a couple of shots of good old dryland *chulco*. I needed them.

When I get a couple of hookers of that triple-powered redeye under my belt it always calls for a couple hundred. So I wound up with a roaring but dignified skin-full by ten-thirty. I hadn't forgotten the operation, not for a minute, so I laid off the stuff and hung on the phone until it was over.

The operation was a success. Wally'd see again! And that called for still more *chulco*.

So, feeling so good about my buddy and so bad about Elsa Vaughn, I eventually graduated to the stage of a crying jag. And I found myself crying on the shoulders, first one and then the other, of a dignified litle Mercurian who wasn't squiffed at all—or hardly at all. He would be, though, if he tried to keep up with me.

"What is thees trouble you so greatly deplore?" he inquired politely. "Perhaps it is that I could be of assistance."

Since Terra cleaned up the planet of those little babies they'd been like that

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when they settled here. And lots of the better ones did settle amongst us, those that were sick of tyranny anyway.

So I spilled the whole thing to this guy—Yeoto, his name was, or something that sounded like that—and he got jittery with some excitement he didn't want to talk about in public.

"It is, fortunately, within Yeoto's power to help you," he swore. "But come with me to my quarters and elucidation shall be made."

For all I knew or cared, this might have been a blind for a good old fashioned rolling. Anyway, I walked right into whatever it was. And that was my lucky night.

This bird turned out to be an expert dermatologist—funny, I can spell that now but couldn't even say it then—who'd been exiled from Mercury. Guess what for? For removing those supposedly permanent green slave-marks!

HE HAD the evidence, too. Color photos—you know, the before and after kind. And he talked to me about pigmentation until I began to feel green in the puss myself. Maybe I was at that; he kept on feeding me *chulcó* and that's liable to do anything to you.

Anyway, he wanted two grand for the job, which wasn't hay. It just happened that I had a little over two thousand saved up, which I didn't care any more for than I do for my right arm. But, what the hell; I wanted to see Wally and the girl happy, didn't I?

So I snaggled onto this Yeoto and, making him bring his bag of tools and dope along, grabbed a cab for Elsa's apartment.

She had left, bag and baggage!

After that I remember dimly asking a lot of questions of a sleepy-eyed but pompous doorman, of starting for the Terra-Mars Spaceport with Yeoto, and of catching the girl just when she was boarding the liner that took off in a few hours from then. I must have made a scene and I was certainly getting pretty well along the road to a pass-out. Anyway, the cops gathered around in no time at all and they gathered me in. One of them must have conked me because the next I knew I was tossing in a hospital bed with a head on me that was something, what I mean. It was daylight.

As the fog cleared a little, I managed to sit up and take a look around. This wasn't any jail house; it wasn't even a funny ward. It wasn't a ward at all but a private room. How come?

Seeing a bell push, I squeezed it till my thumb was sore. And all it brought was a grinning orderly.

"So you came to," he cracked. "How do you feel?"

"How do you think?" I back-cracked. "What day is it?"

"Your lucky one," he said. "Your girl's waiting to see you."

"*My* girl. Don't be foolish, fellow. They don't make any that'd fall for me."

"Well, she paid for your room last night. A Miss Vaughn."

"Elsa!" I gasped, beginning to remember. "How long have I been out?"

The guy looked at his watch. "Twelve hours," he announced.

"Time's wasting," I yawped, tumbling out of bed and diving for the bath room. "Give me five minutes to shave and dress and I'll be ready for visitors—or to go out."

The guy beat it, grinning like a fuzzwit.

WELL, the rest you can just about guess. All but the first and best part of what happened.

Elsa came in with a breezing rush. And was she a dream! No celluloid glamor gal could be more of a knock-

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out. And I hope to turn all the colors of the rainbow if there was a tinge of green in her skin. It was the skin of a baby, smooth and pink and—mmmm!

She kissed me smack on the place you're supposed to be kissed. And then she talked a blue streak, thanking me over and over.

Boiled as I'd been, it seemed as if I'd done the right thing through it all. Yeoto put over his sales talk and had fixed her up. Wally was doing great and would be up in a couple of weeks when his fractures were healed. They were to be married as soon as this was a fact. And I was to be best man.

How do you like that?

"Swell," I told her, wishing my split skull wouldn't keep opening and shutting like an inquisitive oyster. "Everybody's happy, even me. Now I can go back into the Service and not have a screwball hanging around the etherphone going batty over a voice."

The voice rippled out a silvery tinkle of laughter. "That's what you think," said Elsa Vaughn. "I've already signed up in the Service myself and General Tompkins, the old dear, assigned me to the new ship you and Wally are getting. I'll be your etherphone operator and Mess Sergeant as well."

And that was that. All I have left to say is that my two Gs were well spent. But don't tell Elsa or Wally about that, will you?

(Continued from page 73)

The hole leading outside I plugged with the pirate's hat and some cleaning rags. Then I ran out, choking in the thickening smoke, taking a chance of being seen, back to Vans.

"Don't ask questions now!" I told him. "Find the fire alarm system! Make it *ring*. Make them think the ship is on fire!"

I found an intercommunication 'phone for alarm calls, and bellowed into it, "Fire! An enemy shell has hit the rear of the ship! We are on fire! Run for your lives!"

Fire in space! It is one of the worst terrors known to man. It destroys the air-supply, detonates the fuel-compartments. There would be an instant mad scramble to get off the doomed ship.

Within ten minutes Vans and I were alone on the ship, apart from our unconscious prisoner.

A SPACE ship oddly like the Ace of Spades, not too expertly handled, landed on a smooth stretch of Martian surface and slowly came to a standstill after running around awhile on its three wheels. A Martian ship, summoned by radio, landed alongside, and four space-suited figures came out.

I let them into the black ship.

They were Usulor, Mrs. Holors, a soldier, and—Princess Wimpolo.

She put her hands on her hips and looked grim.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"My love," I said, licking my lips, "I present you with a complete pirate ship, rather sooty perhaps" (I had had difficulty in turning off the smoke), "but in excellent working order and with a fabulous treasure, so I am told, on board. In addition Belangor and most of his men are scattered about the void in tiny rocket lifeboats, and should very soon be all mopped up, and I can lead you to where the rest of Belangor's men, treasure and equipment are hidden."

"Not a bad job," Usulor admitted.

"And *that*," Wimpolo said, "is your only excuse for running away from me! All right! See if you get a chance to do it again! Just see if you get a chance!"

As I said before, Festus, you think I am lucky, don't you? Being married to the first lady in Mars, daughter of Emperor Usulor. You ought to be married to a woman who is nearly ten feet tall and weighs half a ton!

You'd have a different idea of it then.—*Don Hargreaves.*

THE END

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OTHER WORLDS
(Concluded from page 118)

that we are able to do it physically, the way they go from their world to this. He probably got a lot of electrical data out of my head that was just Greek to him. Of course, he's dead now, so if he did learn anything he can't pass it on. I don't want to risk getting caught by them again because I may be wrong, but I had a very distinct impression that Pokey Joe up there was baffled. It was way over his head. They ain't bright, Johnny, they just ain't bright!"

"I hope you're right. Let's try and make the control zone and point out to Petey and Gladstone that they're Angels in Heaven. It ought to perk them up, kind of. Besides, I can't go any more of this food here. I feel as though I had swallowed a cannon ball."

THROUGH sign language and pointing to the model city we got over to the chief where we wanted to go and that we wanted to avoid the bat-men. He sent some of his little people with us and they guided us through their labyrinth of underground tunnels. We came out through a tiny exit in the rear of the Idol in the Hall of Awful Shadow. The grey light of day was filtering through the pillars in front as we found the chalk marks on the floor.

We huddled together on the dusty stones, squeezing ourselves into as small a space as possible in order to get entirely within the control zone. The great stone idol stared malevolently out of the gloom at us with its three stone eyes.

"I'll have to find out about that frozen horror when I come back next time," Doc said. "Right now I only hope it doesn't start howling. That seems to bring on the bats . . . oh-oh, here we go again!"

The howling started as a low growl and rapidly rose to a loud wail, rising and falling, seeming to come from all sides. The little people squeaked in terror and scuttled away rapidly, disappearing behind the pillars.

"I hope that guy isn't out having a beer now!" I yelled above the howling.

A bat-man appeared above us, circling slowly, then another and then five all at once. They circled faster and faster, dipping down towards us and drawing in closer.

"Petey, Petey, for God's sake!" I was praying. One of them banked up vertically, dove straight at us! They all were coming with that awful gabbling noise! I felt dizzy and shut my eyes.

There was a crash and Doc was yelling.

"Turn it off! Turn it off!" and the howling had changed in pitch and intensity. I had a funny feeling that I had fainted and looked around dizzily. Doc and Petey must have crashed head-on into each other and were rolling around on the floor, both shouting at once. Gladstone was under a bed, howling with fright. I jumped off the platform and cut both switches and the tubes went dead. I could hear auto horns honking through the open window and the warm sunlight of an August day in New York streamed in through the skylight.

Doc sat up, breathing heavily, and looked at the goggling Petey.

"Petey, my boy, I think we are all coming down with mumps! Will you mix up three glasses of my Mumps Preventative? You know . . . one third tapwater and two thirds Rye."

"Go easy on the tapwater in mine," I said. "There's going to be a party in Heaven tonight!"

THE END

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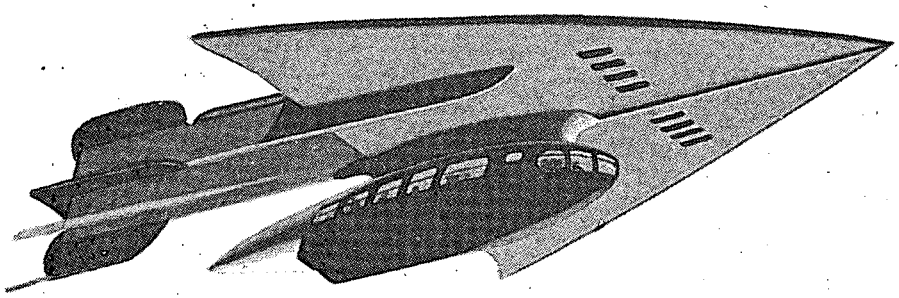

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